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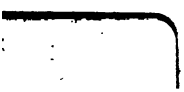
THE WHITE COTTAGE

BY · ZACK



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THE WHITE COTTAGE

THE WHITE COTTAGE

BY

ZACK

Gwendoline Keats

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1901

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NEW YORK

THE WHITE COTTAGE

CHAPTER I

HALF-WAY between two headlands lay the fishing village of Bere-Upton, a handful of cottages, some crushed in between the cliffs, others struggling upwards, following the hill's incline. Far out on the horizon's edge the November sun glowed dully across the water, and then sank out of sight, as if overwhelmed by the rising sea. In the bay a boat drifted before the wind, the tiller yawing from side to side unheeded, as a fisherman drew in and coiled up his lines. The gulls wheeled round him uttering harsh cries; once he raised his head and looked past them at a small white-washed cottage that stood on the cliff's edge apart from the rest of the village and stared back at him from its lattice windows. The young fellow

smiled, and his keen, sensitive face became for the moment almost beautiful.

"When me and Luce be man and wife," he exclaimed, "us will rent that cottage as sure as my name is Mark Tavy." Lowering the sail, he took up the oars and began to row shore-wards. Mark Tavy was barely twenty-six, but he looked older; there was a strain of religious enthusiasm in his blood, and his face, without being spiritual, was worn with inward conflict. The sun sank beneath the horizon, solitariness crept over sea and land and into Mark's heart. Resting on his oars he fell into a reverie.

"The Bible says," he muttered, "that the man who holds by the Almighty, the Almighty will hold by him. Well, I have led a clean life an' acted fair. The devil ain't never bested me yet, and what's more, he never shall." A curious muffled sound, like a subdued laugh, echoed across the water as the wind dropped round a point more east. Mark glanced about him un-

easily. "One could most believe that he was on the listen. Well, let him listen. He can't work me no harm. I'm on the Lord's side." Bending over his oars he sent the boat forward with long swinging strokes, and a few moments later the keel grated on the shingle.

Mark's parents had been dead two years; they had been upright, hard-grained, unsociable people, respected but not liked. Fully assured that when they died their funeral would be well attended, they had cared little that during life their company remained unsought. At their death he went to live with his widowed sister, Susan Flutter. Mark passed her door without entering, turned into a side track and came at last to the White Cottage on the cliff. The moon had risen, and the barred door and garden, shorn of flowers, would have looked desolate to other eyes; but Mark's were full of visions of future happiness. In imagination he saw Luce standing at the door with his child in

her arms, a child so like Luce and yet his. The wind whistled through the bare trees, and he thought he heard again the music of spring, as it had sounded on the far away April morning when love first awoke in his heart.

"God willing, I'll be a good husband to Luce," he murmured, "though her has never cared for me the same as I have for her."

Luce was the only child of John Myrtle, the village stone-mason, and even among the maids of Bere-Upton, who were famous for their good looks, she was accounted a beautiful woman. Mark and she had been friends in childhood; once when she had stood in mortal fear of being carried off by pixies, she had willingly promised to marry him. On reaching manhood Mark had tried hard to get her to renew her promise, but though she had liked him better than the other village lads, and had felt that some day she might be his wife, she had yielded half-heartedly and not till after long press-

ing. Mark, thinking of her strange absent moods when her thoughts and love seemed to wander from him, sighed wearily as he turned away and retraced his steps to Widow Flutter's cottage.

Entering the kitchen he found his sister's two lovers, Constable Garge and Septimus Spong, the postman, seated one on each side of the fire. A pleasant smell issued from the frying-pan, which the buxom widow shook gently while the contents crackled and spat.

"Tripe and chitlings mixed," exclaimed Septimus Spong, with a nod of satisfaction. The meal over, and the widow busy washing up the tea things in the scullery, Constable Garge moved his chair back to the fire and seemed to fall into a dream, while the light from the flames drew his big figure in gigantic shadow on the wall and shone on his corn-coloured beard, turning it to a red gold.

A sudden determination came to the young fellow. "Septimus," he said, address-

ing Spong, "you know that little white-washed cottage o' yours that stands by itself upo' the cliff yonder. Well, I've been thinking lately of getting married and settling down comfortable. I reckon that little snip o' a house wud be just the thing I want."

"Law," exclaimed Spong, "who be you gwaying to marry? The widdy's your sister. But then," he added, as Mark burst into a laugh, "if you give me a bit o' help wi' sommat I've set my mind on, we'll talk about the cottage later. Happen you don't know," he continued, casting a quick glance at his rival, "that the widdy's latest fancy is none other than to be wooed in vuss. Well, I sat in a draught the best part o' last night, but nary a line was I the better for it. I took the widdy to pieces in my mind's eye, as a man might a clock, but not one part o' her rhymed wi' t'other, and yet, mind you, her's that pleasant to look on, a man could have sworn there was vuss in her somewhere."

"Well," exclaimed Mark, glancing down at the man's red face, with its mingled expression of cunning and simplicity, "what will you do?"

"Did 'ee ever write a vuss yourself?"

The young fisherman coloured. "Once," he answered, "but I tore un up."

"Would he fit the widdy?"

"Law bless 'ee," Mark replied, not without indignation, "that was writ to a maid."

"I ain't got nought to say agin thic. The widdy was a maid herself once."

Mark cleared his throat. "Come outside," he said. "Poo'try's warm work."

"Aye, there isn't its ekal for taking the flesh off a man," agreed Spong, picking up his cap from the table and following Mark out. "Well," he continued when the door closed behind them, "let us have the vuss."

The young fellow drew in a quick breath and glanced first down the silent street and then up at the sky where the stars flashed one against the other.

"A man," he said, "feels more like poo'-try out here."

"Aye," Spong assented; "the wind is due east. Don't keep me puddling round longer than needsome."

"Well," Mark explained, "the lines run so:

I.

"Her eyes they be so dimmet brown,
Her hair is rust o' gold.
And all the skies must tummil down
Before she shall grow old.

II.

"Her breath is cool upo' the lips
As dew upo' the fern,
And he who first its freshness sips,
Has nothing left to earn.

III.

"Her thoughts be sweet as young spring grass
That greens the pleasant plain.
And he who dares to woo the lass,
Must keep his heart full clane.

"That be they," Mark exclaimed, heaving a sigh. "It makes me sweat all over to think that I ever wrote 'em. And now for the cottage."

"Well," replied Spong slowly, "I be most 'mazing sorry, but I let un not more than an hour ago to Ben Lupin."

"Ben Lupin!" cried the young fisherman, a sudden fierce anger blazing up in his blue eyes.

"Aye, he's come home at last."

"Curse him!" exclaimed Mark. "Five years he's bided quiet, and now he comes and takes the little home I have set my heart on to build his own nest in."

An expression, half pity, half contempt, passed across Septimus Spong's face. "Ben Lupin be one o' they that things fall to," he said; "and you, if I know aught o' men, belong to them folk that desarve and don't git. Wull, wull, this is a queer world; 'tis better to be born lucky than wise."

Mark did not wait for the end of the

homily, but strode off up the hill, head bent, shoulders hunched, and hands thrust deep into his pockets.

Spong watched him a moment, and then turned to re-enter the cottage. "Dang me," he exclaimed suddenly, stopping short, "if that there poo'try vuss iddn't gone clane out o' my head, and the chances be that I shan't light on un agin this side o' the Day o' Jidgment."

CHAPTER II

It seemed to Mark, as he walked away, that his disappointment would have been less bitter if the cottage had been taken by any other man than Ben Lupin. He and Ben were about the same age, their interests had clashed before, and in each instance it mattered little whether Mark had right on his side or not, the result had been the same, and the event decided in Lupin's favour. Mark saw himself as a just man—perhaps that is how we all see ourselves; he desired to believe in a world where good and bad met with their deserts, but into such a well-regulated universe the figure of Ben Lupin obstinately refused to fit.

It may be that he inherited from his father, old Timothy Lupin the poacher, a certain

faculty for the slipping out of as well as into difficulties. The Bere-Uptonites told strange tales of the old man over their ale, hinting at more than they cared to put into words; but of Ben himself they spoke out freely enough, for though when on mischief bent he never skimped the doing of it, he sinned with so bare a face and in so open a manner, that men could not but hold the deed less black than in truth it was.

During the five years of Lupin's absence, Mark had not thought much about him, except when some glaring instance of the wicked flourishing forced itself upon his attention; then he would track down the fields of memory, and pinning Lupin, would drag him forth into the broad light of experience, exclaiming: "There, he's just such another." Indeed, Lupin, as depicted by Mark's mental vision, cut but a sorry figure—not that he was intentionally misrepresented, but rather, that Mark, summing up his own failures, dumped them straight

down in paint, as Lupin's ill-gotten success. Nothing, perhaps, would have astonished Ben Lupin more, had it been possible for him to realize it, than the strength of the resentment which he had aroused in Mark. Personally he bore no grudge against, neither had he ever wished to compete with, the young fisherman; he had rather a contempt for him than otherwise. Events that had left a rankling sore in Mark's heart, had passed by, making little or no impression on Lupin's: the fight, the struggle against too heavy odds, the ultimate inevitable failure, had fallen to Mark; success marched with Lupin, and he had not even heard the jarring of its wheels. Insignificant and all but forgotten events thronged through the young fellow's mind as he hurried forward, trivial episodes left behind him with boyhood. He recalled the day on which he had found his first hobby-hawk's nest, and lying face downwards on the cliff's edge, had pointed out the spot to Lupin, and Ben in return had

taken all the eggs. True, the nest was situated in an almost inaccessible place, and Mark had but poor skill as a cragsman—yet, he had always felt that the eggs ought to have been his. When he had expressed this opinion to Lupin, the latter had laughed and said that if he could climb down to the spot, then he would give him back the eggs. Many a time Mark had adventured to do this, while Ben grinned down derisively at him from above, but success never crowned his efforts—partly because he lacked skill, yet more perhaps that Lupin's disbelief in his power prevented him from making full use of the skill he had. Once raked out of the limbo of forgetfulness, his thoughts dwelt lingeringly on the trivial affair; there seemed some mysterious affinity between it and Lupin's present action in depriving him of the cottage. The possibility that Ben might well have been unconscious of the disappointment he inflicted, had no force of appeal, and was dismissed with scant courtesy from the

young fisherman's mind. Resentment burnt too hot and the light from its flames fell in too partial a fashion.

The Myrtles' cottage stood at the corner of a long lane which, turning off at right angles, ran back in the direction of the sea. When, a few minutes later, Mark drew near the spot, he saw, seated on a low wall facing the house, the figure of Lupin. Ben, carelessly dressed, his cotton shirt open at the throat, showing his muscular brown neck, both hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets, heels beating a tattoo upon the wall, sat with his head flung back, while from his lips issued the sound of a whistle, so clear and full, that it might have come from some deep-throated bird. Conscious of his own well-clothed person, Mark's resentment grew less keen, a feeling almost of satisfaction stole through him, and he saw, as if cut in stone, the advantage of respectability. Stopping short, he looked at the Myrtles' cottage. The front windows were

open and the blinds up. A moment he half pitied Ben, the next he realized the core of meaning concealed beneath the spectacle, and it seemed to him but just that Lupin should have made choice of such a spot to cut so sorry a figure in. Buoyed up by the fitness of things, Mark advanced and knocked loudly at the Myrtles' door. The force of the whole universe seemed beneath the knock as the sound of it went echoing down the street. For a long time, however, it remained unanswered. At last, just as Mark was raising his hand for a second application, the door was opened by John Myrtle.

"What in thunder be that devil's tune you've been playing on the panels?" he asked, in an exasperated voice, poking his red face close to Mark's.

The young fisherman drew back, he was conscious that Lupin had ceased to whistle and was listening for his reply. Half glancing round he caught Lupin's deep-set black eyes fixed on him. For a moment he stared

angrily back at the ugly, rough-cut face with its expression of mingled humour and daring, then he addressed himself to John Myrtle.

"I've jest called round to speak to Luce," he said.

"Wull, there's nought agin 'ee a-doing so, if you knaws your place, and behaves like any other respectable lad," Myrtle answered. "Will 'ee come in, or shall I ax her to step out to 'ee?"

The publicity in which he was being put to shame caused the hot colour to mount to Mark's face, for the ill-timed loudness of the knock hardly out-rivalled John Myrtle's voice, in scope of sound. "I wud rather zee her here," he said.

"Zo be then," and Myrtle returned into the house in search of his daughter. There was a long pause; Lupin began again to whistle: loud, full, clear, the notes seemed to fill the air with a sweet freshness. The sound, more like a wood-bird calling to its

mate than a man whistling, only served to increase Mark's irritation—there was an obvious impropriety in such music coming from such lips. At last, reluctantly, as if drawn against her will, Luce approached.

Putting his hand on her arm, "Come wi' me," he said; "there's sommat I want to tell you." In the half light he could see that she was unusually pale.

"Wait till I get my shawl," she answered hesitatingly. He allowed her to go, and stood waiting with scant patience for her return. At last she came back.

"Whatever made 'ee so long?" he asked.

She did not reply, and he strode away down the lane, she following, till suddenly they heard the sea beating against the rocks, and found themselves face to face with the little white-washed cottage. Then Mark gave vent to some of his bitterness in words. "Lupin's taken our little cottage," he burst out; "the cottage where our children would have been born."

The girl drew nearer, leant upon the small gate and stared across at the cottage with a curious, tense gaze, as if it were not the cottage that she saw, but some vision which frightened and yet fascinated her.

"I have got to care for the little place," Mark continued. "I used to kain up at it when I was out in the bay, fishing; seemed to me at times that us was already man and wife, and that you was waiting up here kind o' anxious. Whiles I could 'most hear your voice tread across the sea. 'Mark,' you would say, 'Mark, bain't you coming home along?' Then I would up wi' my lines and out wi' the oars. Aye, Luce, I was always for coming home to 'ee."

She dropped her face upon her hands and shivered.

"Dear heart," he said, "you be cold standing here. Shall us be moving?"

Raising her head she stood for a moment looking at him, then with a sudden movement flung herself into his arms. "Mark, Mark,"

she cried, "hold me, so that no wan, no matter who he be, can take me from 'ee."

He clasped her against his breast.

"Why is it," she said, "that I can't feel 'ee close? Why do 'ee stand so far away sort o' insecure?"

"But I am here, sweetheart; my arms be round 'ee."

"Your spirit iddn't here," she cried bitterly. "I don't feel it saying kinder masterful—'Luce, you be jest Mark's, and he'll up and do wi' 'ee what he reckons best.'"

"Why should I say that?" Mark expostulated. "You've got your rights the same as me."

Dropping her hands to her side she retreated a few paces from him. "Tiddn't no use," she said; "a man can't be more'n hisself." The moonlight fell upon her slight figure and upturned face. She had thrown a red shawl over her head and shoulders, and her fair hair, blown loose by the wind, tangled and curled about her forehead. Tears

stood in her eyes and her lips trembled. "You bain't naught but a lad, for all your six-and-twenty years," she added with a broken laugh.

The blood rushed into the young fisherman's face. "I never know what you be after," he said. "Times you won't as much as let me lay a hand on you, then you'll worrit 'cause I stand aside. I love 'ee, Luce. What more do you want?"

A smile, half sad, half mocking, played for a moment about the corners of her lips. "Seems most as if I was alles needing sommat different from what I gits," she answered.

"When us be man and wife," he began.

"Ah," she interrupted, "shall us ever be thic?"

"What do 'ee mean?" he said, taking a quick step towards her.

"I don't know what I mean. I reckon I'll just go home."

"Luce," he exclaimed in a harsh voice,

"'tisn't that you have grown tired o' me?"

"No, 'tiddn't thic."

"Dear heart," he said, bending over her, "you kinder love your lad, don't 'ee?"

She fell to sobbing gently. "Seems there's sommat missing 'twix he and me," she answered.

Mark's face whitened. "Luce," he said, and his mouth twitched, the words coming in jerks; "you know how folks throw it at me that I may deserve but I don't get," he stopped. "I couldn't bear it," he burst out. "I jest couldn't bear it."

She drew herself away from him and a hard expression came into her eyes. "If 'ee didn't hold so much by the 'pinion o' the village and more by yourself," she exclaimed, "you wud come nearer gitting your rightful. 'Tis when you see things the same as thic that I feels so kind o' far away from 'ee."

"You are always hard and judging," he answered with a bitter laugh.

She looked past the cottage out over the sea, where the waves purred against each other and the moon shone on them in wide sheets of light.

"I ain't jidging by nater," she replied, "'tis only wi' 'ee that I am so mortal picksome." Wrapping the shawl more closely round her she turned and began to move away.

He watched her a moment in silence, then springing forward, he caught her arm.

"Luce," he cried, "swear that you will never care for no other lad than me. Swear it."

She tore herself loose from his grasp. "'Tis yourself that should have the swearing o' that," she exclaimed in passionate impatience. "But there's many a thread of a boy that 'ud beat 'ee at playing the man," and without waiting a reply, she sped away in the direction of her home.

While the echo of her retreating footsteps still sounded in Mark's ears, his attention was attracted to the figure of Constable Garge,

seated close by on a heap of stones. The policeman was to all appearance sunk deep in meditation, and in return to the young fellow's angry question as to what he was doing there, raised a pair of mild, dream-clouded eyes.

"Was that Luce Myrtle?" he asked, and then, not waiting for an answer, continued in a dull far-away voice, "I was standing 'longside the maid, in the Myrtles' doorway, when Ben Lupin came paking home from foreign parts. 'Luce,' says he, 'here I be back.' Her didn't make no answer, but fell all of a tremble. Arter a bit her hiked inside and slammed the door. Ben he laughed full out like the ploomp-ploomp of water over stones."

There was a long silence broken only by the cry of some wild-fowl flying inland.

"I was to have been called in church on Sunday," exclaimed Mark at last in a thick voice, "but Lupin, he's taken the cottage."

A slow smile played across the constable's face.

"Well," he answered, "I'll go to marning sarvice and hear 'ee read in."

"But——" began Mark.

"I alles reckoned 'twas the maid not the cottage you wanted."

The words afforded Mark food for reflection.

CHAPTER III.

On nearing home Luce saw in front of her the short, thick-set figure of Ben Lupin. Involuntarily she turned and fled along a path leading upwards. Fear, she scarce knew of what, possessed her, and the ground seemed to echo back the tramp of following footsteps; yet when she stopped and listened no sound broke the stillness, except the far-off murmur of the tide. Hurrying forward she reached the hill summit, the lane suddenly coming to an end in broad sweeps of pasture that stretched away as far as the eye could reach. Near her a group of beech trees, their naked stems glistening in the moonlight, clawed the ground with great fang-like roots. Leaning against one of the trunks was Ben Lupin. The girl stood looking at him, silent and bewildered.

"Well," he said, breaking into a low musical laugh, "it seems as if us both had the same tastes."

She did not answer. The wind caught her shawl, blowing it back, revealing her form. Ben drew nearer; the moon shone full on him. He had never made love to this woman, she had been little more than a child when he had left the village followed by a chorus of abuse, which he had aroused against himself by a wild piece of work in which a woman's honour had fallen victim. Ben cared little for the abuse showered so liberally upon him; above all else he loved to hold life in a careless hand, tossing it now this way now that, indifferent to what befell, playing with the happiness of others, even as he played with his own. Fate had watched his career strangely complacent, letting him have his will with men and things, and Lupin hardened, scoffed at the idea of retribution. It seemed to him as if suffering could never fall to his lot, life containing

nothing that he either loved or feared. Unknown to him he had long held sway over Luce Myrtle's imagination, fired by tales of his wild fantastic doings. Secretly she had wished for and again half dreaded the return of this ugly faced man, who had such a way with a maid, that all women perforce must love him; yet had she so shielded her longing in the privacy of her heart that it had been to her but a half-conscious need of some more subtle flavour in life and love than had hitherto fallen to her share. Up to the time of Lupin's return the fear that she might some day be tempted to be unfaithful to Mark had never troubled her; still she had been restless under her promise, much as a young filly strains at the bit, when the wrong pair of hands holds the reins; but with the meeting again of Lupin the veil of self-deception which had hidden the truth from her was torn aside, and she saw that it was he and not Mark whom she loved. Overwhelmed at the discovery, she

had no thought but to thrust the secret back once more into her heart, where it had been concealed so long. Now, as she stood opposite Lupin in the soft grey moonlight, fear grew upon her so that she almost ceased to feel afraid, becoming strangely calm, gazing inward on herself as on some person far away; and he, accustomed to see women betray the weakness of their defence, scanned each line of her face, seeking in vain for that which lay everywhere and yet escaped detection.

Filled with resentment at her apparent indifference, he longed to have the power to wound her. A moment before he could have sworn that she was his to do what he liked with; now, even while his anger quickened, she suddenly smiled. Ben Lupin drew back a pace, much as if he had been struck, and his dark gipsy skin whitened beneath its coating of tan. He had followed the girl from a spirit of mischievous devilry, not meaning to hurt her be-

yond the stealing of a few kisses from a pair of pretty lips; but now the resentful anger of a moment past stiffened suddenly into a dangerous weapon of offence, the man behind it growing cool and alert, ready to wield it with an unsparing hand. A shiver of expectation passed from him to her, setting the veil she had raised between them a-tremble, and after fluttering a moment it fell, revealing to his astonished gaze the whole surface of her fear. He drew closer, and doing so, felt his inner self creep out and play with hers as a cat might with a mouse.

"Luce," he exclaimed, "did 'ee mind on me when I wor away?"

Her lips trembled faintly, but she made no answer.

"You jest flowered into yourself, I reckon, and paid no heed to t'other folk." His voice, in speaking, was singularly rich and beautiful; listening to it the girl burst into a storm of sobs. Unresisted, he wound his

arm round her, tilting back her head and looking into her brown tear-filled eyes. Slowly the soft warmth of her body penetrated his, and the desire came to him to let his hand slip over the trembling little form so that it should perforce reveal itself to his touch; but the power to do so failed him, and he stood and wondered at his helplessness. The moon rose high in the heavens, and the clean salt-laden breeze blew up from the sea, setting the branches of the beeches sawing one against the other. Slowly, almost tentatively, Lupin's hold relapsed, and the girl feeling herself free, looked at him a moment in startled surprise, and then, bounding away, fled homewards. He flung himself upon the ground, covering his ears with his hand as if he would shut out the sound of her small feet upon the stones; but long after the echo had died, it still seemed to beat on in his brain. A horrid suspicion haunted him lest he had been weak; weakness, of all things, was that which he despised

most. He thought of running after her and taking a quick revenge on himself and her, and half rose to his feet, only to sink back once more baffled and inert.

Luce did not stay her course till she reached home. Pushing open the cottage door, she found her father seated before the fire, smoking, his hat on a chair by his side, a red cotton handkerchief curled up in the crown. John Myrtle never hung up his hat when he entered a house, but placed it either on the floor between his feet, or else close at hand on the nearest chair. This habit was a constant source of annoyance to his wife, being, as she said, "poor-minded and mean-ful of nought," and John, who was a good-natured man, would gladly have broken with it, had he not been too slow to part with a custom once acquired. He glanced up at Luce's entrance and removed his pipe.

"Your mother's up to bed this half-hour and more," he said.

The girl made no answer, but, putting off

her shawl, came and knelt beside him, and John Myrtle, after letting his right arm slip round her, returned his pipe to his mouth and smoked placidly on. There was silence in the room except for the faint nibbling of a mouse behind the boards and the tick tick of the clock. At last Luce spoke.

"Fether," she said, "I do veel ez if I shud niver marry, but jest bide home here along wi' 'ee and mother."

"Why," he asked, "have you and Mark had wuds?"

"No, 'tiddn't thic, on'y I'd a deal rather bide quiet wi' 'ee."

John Myrtle changed the pipe to the other side of his mouth before answering. "You'll think different when the time comes," he said. "'Tis the way o' a maid to veel shy o' loving vust a-long."

She dropped her head on his knee and began to sob. "I do love 'ee, fether, a deal more'n I do Mark, I do, fether, I do."

But Myrtle was not to be persuaded.

"'Tiddn't nought but the maiden in 'ee that makes 'ee reckon that," he returned, and Luce ceased to argue.

"Take me up in your arms, fether, zame ez you do-ed many a time when I wor a chile," she said.

He did as she bade him, and after a while, tired out by emotion, she dropped off to sleep; then John Myrtle rose, and climbing the stairs, laid the little frail figure upon the bed.

"Her iddn't much more'n a sprig o' a chile now," he exclaimed, going out and softly closing the door.

Long afterwards she awoke with a start. Below, in the street, a man was whistling; the notes thrust themselves upon her, challenging her to heed.

She put out her hands imploringly.—"Don't call me, Ben; don't call me or I'll be fo'ced to valler," she cried.

CHAPTER IV.

During the next few days Lupin, who all his life had been quick to act, fell into a fit of indecision. His desire to punish Luce thrived, but growing along with it was an increasing respect for the girl. Hitherto this quality had been singularly absent from his relationships with women, and Ben Lupin found its presence perturbing, for while it added new flavour to the pursuit, it engendered a fear lest in the further contact with Luce he should discover some strange, unsuspected weakness in himself. The sudden drain on his assurance left the channel of conceit gaping and dry, and filled him with a thirst for self-applause. There were moments, too, when it seemed to him that he was making a strange fuss over a small concern, and that he had only to meet her

again to find her much as other women. The suspicion half irritated, half pleased him; but for some reason he avoided analysing it, and he did not seek Luce out.

When Sunday came, however, and the bells rang for morning service, he slipped quietly into the old grey stone church, and sat down where he could see without being seen. He was barefooted, and wore the same shabby clothes that had excited Mark's contempt; but it was no false shame on the score of dress which made him wish to avoid observation. His heavy black brows drew together as he glanced about him; only once during the last five years had he been inside a church, and the recalling of that occasion gave him scant cause for amusement. Slowly the congregation filed in; and, Lupin's eyes falling on the tall, high-shouldered figure of Mark Tavy, dismissed it with a brief glance of contempt. Flushed and erect, the young fisherman moved up the aisle and sat down in the corner of the Myrtles' pew. Seeing

him there, Constable Garge leant across from his seat opposite, and exclaimed in a loud whisper:

"I've come to hear 'ee called, the zame ez I zed I wud."

Lupin caught the words, and glanced round, wondering with vague amusement which of the women present had been silly enough to set her affections on so poor a creature. He could not bring himself to regard Mark seriously; for him he was a young, excitable fool, forever reaching up at what lay beyond his stretch—a man, Lupin held, should be a better judge of distances. Mark, however, sitting bolt upright with the sun full on him, felt that he had not only struck out for, but reached, his goal. He was serenely happy, the memory of his many failures passed from him, he weltered in success as only he to whom it seldom falls, can.

A few minutes later, the Myrtles entered, but without Luce; just at the last she

had refused to come. Mark gulped down his disappointment; he had looked forward to watching the colour steal up in her face when their names were read out in the rector's deep chest tones, for the Rev. Benjamin Baugh had a way of reading the banns that made a man feel there was to be no drawing back, and villagers of a less decided turn of mind preferred on that account to be "put up by the currit." Lupin rose at the Myrtles' entrance, and stood, half hidden by a pillar, his eyes fixed on the door. The service began; he paid no heed to it, or to the curious glances that from time to time were cast in his direction. As the moments passed and it became more and more apparent that those who intended being present had already arrived, his brows creased together, and his small black eyes shone fiercely impatient. There was a slight pause, while the rector shuffled among the worn leather-covered books for the names of the couples desirous of so publicly asserting their

intention of being united. Jarred by the sudden silence, Lupin glanced round, his eyes falling on Mark sitting up stiff, straight and red as the hollyhocks beside the White Cottage door. A feeling almost akin to sympathy stirred for a moment in Ben Lupin's heart, which the next was swept clear of all emotion but that of relief. The rector read the banns, closed the book, and the congregation fell to thinking of other things. Lupin stole out again into the warm summer air. A joyous elation possessed him; he knew his own mind at last, and saw straight as a shaft of light the way that led to his desire. Hurrying up the steep road, his shoeless feet making no sound on the cobble-stones, he came to the Myrtles' cottage. It stood a little back from the main street, while from behind a small garden struck out, parallel to and overlooking the lane. Lupin climbed the flight of steps leading to the wicket gate, and doing so his eyes fell on Luce seated beneath a willow tree. The

branches stirred by the breeze threw a regiment of faint shadows upon her white gown and broad-brimmed hat. She was sunk in thought. Unmarked, he drew nearer, till he could almost count the fine gold hairs lying along the nape of her neck. A sudden fear, a sudden distrust of himself and his brutal needs, thrilled him. Unconsciously, he raised his hand and uncovered before her: and standing there bare-headed, silent and inanimate as a stone, his presence became known to her, forcing itself upon her subtly, so that she blushed for very shame at the pleasure the knowledge imparted. He watched the colour thread the white of her neck till it reached the outlines of the cheek that was half turned from him; then he drew close, and sank down on the bench at her side. A great longing came to him to look into her eyes, but a power stronger than his will bound him to patience. She fell to weeping gently; he made no effort to comfort her, even though one of the tears

fell upon his hand; and after a while he rose and stole away, passing noiselessly out into the sun-scented air.

The next morning it was reported in the village that a large shoal of herring had been sighted outside the bay, and Mark, together with other fishermen, sailed by the afternoon tide in search of them. A sudden gale springing up from the north-west drove the little fleet further down the coast, obliging them to take shelter, and it was not till the following Sunday that they bent slowly back towards Bere-Upton. A faint sound of church bells came over the water as the boats tacked across the bay, and Mark, hearing it, glanced instinctively in the direction of the White Cottage. The sight recalled Lupin to his mind and he fell into a fit of bitter musing. When his boat anchored alongside the quay, and he ran quickly up the steps, a group of fishermen who were lounging near, broke into a subdued laugh, which was suddenly hushed as they saw Ben

Lupin picking his way across the ropes towards them.

"I've got sommat to say to 'ee," he exclaimed, halting opposite Mark. "Come up yonder where us can have speech by ourselves."

There was a moment's silence; the group of fishermen edged nearer. A sudden dread entered Mark's heart.

"Say what you have got to say and have done wi' it," he answered.

But Ben had already turned and was walking away with rapid steps. Mark watched him cross the quay, and then, hardly conscious of what he did, followed in pursuit.

"Hivers!" exclaimed one of the fisher lads, "shall us go after and zee the fun?"

"Na, na," replied a grey-haired man, "let 'em fight it out alone, happen they'll be the sooner friendsome."

Three small bare-legged boys, however, slipped down from the wall where they had

been seated and ran after Mark; other urchins joined them, and the young fisherman could hear their short, quick breathing, and the pattering of their footsteps behind him. Leaving the main street, Lupin had entered the lane leading upwards to the White Cottage. At the gate he stopped and waited for Mark to approach.

"Go in to her," he said, pointing to the cottage. "Maybe her can tell 'ee better'n I can how things was brought about."

Pushing open the door, Mark entered.

In the corner of the kitchen, her arms folded on a small table and her face pressed down upon them, sat Luce. He looked at her in silence, and the only sound in the room was the dulled, tearless sobbing that broke from her lips. At last he drew closer. "What be 'ee doing here, Luce?" he asked. She did not answer. Putting out a trembling hand he touched her, and she raised her head and looked at him. It seemed to Mark standing there that his heart

was being drawn from his breast, and peeled piece by piece as a boy peels a willow twig.

"I wud ha' been true to 'ee," she exclaimed at last in a broken voice. "I wanted to be true to 'ee; but, lad, I jest worn't."

He turned away, the pain of her words was unbearable.

"I reckoned," he said, "that you was the wan pussen in the whole world that sort o' understood things." Then he went out, shutting the door after him. The sun shone full on his white, haggard face as he reeled down the pathway and confronted Lupin. Ben drew back with an unconscious respect for his enemy's grief; but Mark would not be avoided.

"Be you married honest?" he asked, turning on him.

"Us was special licensed."

"You blackguardly thief!"

"Vule," Lupin burst out, his temper rising. "I didn't steal the maid; her was never yours."

Mark drew his knife. "You shan't have her, nuther," he cried, rushing forward; but before he could deliver the blow Ben struck him under the chin with terrific force, his jaw and skull seemed to crush together and saw into his brain, and he fell to the ground, stunned. Lupin went back to the cottage, shutting the door. A row of bare-legged boys seated on the fence near stared down on Mark's prostrate figure with feelings of mingled awe, self-importance, and delight, then one by one they slid from their perch and trotted back home. Soon the village was roused by the news that Mark had been killed in a fight, and, headed by Septimus Spong, they came hurrying up to view the body. On reaching the spot where the murder had taken place they found nothing but a stone covered with blood; the corpse had disappeared. Spong at once addressed the crowd: "In there," he said, pointing at the little white-washed cottage, "ruckying behind some bed, was the murderer, red-handed

from the deed, and it was the dooty of the young and active-limbed to go in and fetch un out. He called on 'em," he continued, "as postman, and representative of the State."

No one stirred. "It was," they answered, "the law's business, not theirs; and if Septimus Spong chose to represent the State, he had better go in and bring the murderer out himself."

At this last suggestion there was an awkward pause, broken by a very little boy, who came forward and said: "Mark worn't noways dead, but had got up and hiked away."

The information seemed to fill the crowd with both relief and resentment. Mark Tavy, they agreed, was a poor worm, and if there was one thing more sure than another 'twas he had got his deserts, and still talking of him they returned once more to the village.

CHAPTER V.

It was a favourite maxim of Mrs. Myrtle's, that he who sets out to condescend had best be sure of his return fare before starting. She was an authority on such matters, having more than once made the journey herself. To go no further back than her marriage, a bold piece of mating, for John Myrtle had been born between parish sheets and reared on parish bread, yet union with him had never caused her rich yeoman blood to run the thinner. She held her head high; not, it is true, attempting to tilt her husband's up to the same level, but resting content with the knowledge that the distance between them had never been lessened by any bending on her part. Success, however, does not always beget a desire to encourage others, and imitation is apt to be held to be presumptuous

as often as flattering. So when Luce, in preference to the highly respectable Mark Tavy, suddenly united herself with Lupin, Mrs. Myrtle took but a gloomy view of the affair. Indeed, she was inclined to resent Luce's behaviour. If a mother casts aside shoes, it by no means follows that a daughter can afford to walk without boots; and in the privacy of her own mind Mrs. Myrtle numbered Luce among those who had best let such trapesing alone. In coming to this conclusion she had no wish to disparage her daughter.

After her cold, limited fashion, she was fond of Luce; but she was a proud woman —proud of the respect in which, in spite of marriage with a man beneath her, she was still held—and the fear haunted her lest Luce, in a not unsimilar position, should fail to exact a like esteem, and prove in some roundabout way that the union between her father and mother had been misjudged. Mark had always been somewhat

of a favourite with her, "a well-conducted young man, more creditable than credit-getting." On being told of the scuffle that had taken place between him and Lupin, she made no comment; but when later the same day Mark, bundle in hand, passed her door, she called to him to come in. He complied unwillingly enough, and refusing to take a seat, stood close to the door, his face expressive both of irritation and impatience. The little room was vivid to him with the presence of Luce, he longed to be out of it; but Mrs. Myrtle, eyeing him over, saw that he had on his second-best suit and a pair of well-blacked shiny boots, and realized afresh that here at least was a man who might have been trusted with the honour of the Myrtles. She was a small, neutral-tinted woman with a narrow forehead and high cheek-bones. Glancing from him to the little bundle under his arm she nodded approvingly; she guessed it contained the clothes bought especially for his wedding.

"That's your new shiny suit you've got in there, isn't it?" she inquired.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"Well, I'm glad you're taking it 'long with you."

He frowned but made no comment.

"What have you done wi' the boat?" she asked after a pause, picking up some needlework from the table and commencing to sew.

"Sold her to Ned Lewis."

"Well?"

"For a fair price."

Again she nodded approvingly. "I'm sorry things have fallen out as they have between you and Luce," she said.

He turned away. "I reckon I must be on the move."

"Oh! bide a moment, and take a seat, like a reasonable lad," she exclaimed, pushing a chair towards him. "You haven't told me half I want to know. What about the nets? Did you part wi' they too?"

"Sold 'em to the same man."

"Well?"

"Yes, middling well."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, biting off the end of her thread with a sharp snap, "you would have made a dependable husband."

His thin, emotional face flushed hotly. "You mustn't reckon I'm gwaying away beat," he said with sudden passion. "Lupin ain't seen the last of me yet by a long bit—there's zommat that tells me that if I hold myzulf to patience, the Almighty 'ull show me how to get quits wi' un."

An expression of uneasiness came into the old woman's eyes.

"I've no opinion o' the high falutin'," she answered. "That what a man can't get iddn't meant for him, and you'll be wise if you let Ben Lupin alone in the future."

"Do you reckon the Almighty is gwaying to let 'un alone?" he burst out. "Do you reckon that God is always gwaying to zee the wicked flourish at the expense o' the

well-doer? No, I tull 'ee, there be ill days in store for Ben Lupin, and when they are at hand I shan't be far from un."

The colour rose in Mrs. Myrtle's face, turning it a sort of drabby red.

"All I can say," she exclaimed sharply, "is that I hope it will be a long day before he sets eyes on 'ee then."

"Well for un if it be," Mark answered, and, picking up his bundle, went out, shutting the door after him.

Mark walked to the nearest seaport town and sailed two days later in a barque bound for Nova Scotia. He did not mix with the other hands, but when off duty, sat apart, brooding over his wrongs. From time to time he would take his Bible from his pocket, and opening it at the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, read over again the lines, "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord," and the words seemed to him an especial promise on the part of God to execute judgment on Ben

Lupin. Then one day a sudden fear stole into his heart lest he had delayed too long and that his enemy had already fallen before the vengeance of God.

Winter was thawing towards spring when he reached England and turned his face in the direction of his native village. The sap had risen high in the trees and the buds were swollen and pink with the juice of life. Mark pressed forward; the air, full of vitality, tasted fresh and cold upon his lips as water from a well. Dusk gathered, slowly greying the fields and blurring their outlines. One by one he passed the familiar land-marks till at length his eyes rested on the White Cottage. At the sight of it a feeling of loneliness came to him, and he felt as an outcast gazing across wide dividing seas towards his native land. He flung himself down on the ground and sobbed: the thought of God's impending vengeance failed to comfort him; it seemed but of scant account compared with what he had lost. Rising after a while he

stole noiselessly forward, pushed open the garden gate and creeping in hid behind a juniper bush that grew near the open window. The firelight fell full on Lupin's face as he bent over the model of a ship he was rigging, and opposite him sat Luce; the needlework had slipped from her hands and lay unheeded on her lap. Her eyes were fixed on the gathering dusk, but to Mark it was as if she was looking at him. The nerves of his body twanged together and seemed to make vocal the aching of his heart. Watching, he saw the tears slowly gather and fall one by one upon her work, and yet he was not deceived, he knew they were tears of happiness.

Ben looked up. "Sweetheart!" he said.

Rising from her seat she knelt beside him, and he put his arm round her. "What be it?" he asked tenderly.

She made no immediate answer, but hid her face against his coat.

"The world zims so 'mazing full o' life," she exclaimed at last.

Lupin smiled. "I don't understand 'ee, little 'un," he said.

She caressed his face with her hands. "Do 'ee reckon that there be thic that cud draw us nearer one to t'other?" she asked softly.

"Na," replied Ben in a surprised voice, "na-ways 'tall."

She burst into a little happy laugh. "But there *will* be sich a wan."

"I've niver heard tell o' un then," Lupin answered.

"Oh, can't 'ee reckon who he is?" she asked tremulously.

Bending forward, Lupin drew her up close to his breast. "'Tiddn't no ways our son?" he whispered.

She did not answer, nor did he need a reply in words, her body clinging to his, throbbed out the story of its own joy. Then did the thought of God's vengeance fill Mark with derision. He rushed away and the hills rang with his laughter.

CHAPTER VI.

When dawn threaded its way through the darkness, and the great sun swung sheer up above the hills, Mark, who had wandered all night in the fields, found himself near the farm of his cousin, Samuel Bompas. The house was visible between the trees, smoke creeping through the branches skyward. Rooks flew towards the arable land, and in the meadows the cows awaited the herdsman and his clattering pails. Mark threw himself upon the grass, and the smell of it was sweet to his nostrils; lonely and miserable, he stretched out his arms to the earth as to a friend. Stamped upon his brain, compelling him to gaze upon it, was the picture of Luce kneeling at her husband's feet, her face pressed against his breast, while she told him of the other one who should come to bind

them in yet closer union. Mark beat his head against the ground to rid himself of the intolerable vision, but it would not be put to flight. He covered his ears with his hands to shut out Luce's voice, but he still heard her questioning Lupin: "Do 'ee reckon there be thic that cud draw us closer wan to t'other? There will *be* sich a wan." By what right had Lupin torn fatherhood from him? It seemed as if the gaping wound of his nature could never be healed. His virility rose in rebellion against the existence of this yet unborn child—the child that should have been his own, and was Lupin's. How often had he not dreamed of the child, felt its soft kisses upon his face in sleep, the tiny hands playing with his beard. It could not be that Luce should bear it to another, and that other his enemy. Yes, she would bear Lupin's son, she longed to bear him, for she loved Lupin. Mark raised his face wet with dew and tears to heaven. "O God," he said, "'tiddn't true

her loves un. O God Almighty, not that, not that!"

The trees, rubbing their branches one against the other, sent down a murmur of soft noises to him. High overhead sounded the note of the cuckoo; as if set rocking by the breeze, the other birds, their first triumphant burst of song spent, rushed out their notes less hurriedly, yet with such a careless improvidence of sound that Mark, who had sunk back once more upon the grass, listened to them in unconscious gratitude. A feeling of rest stole over him, and his brain, torn with thought, healed itself in sleep. How long he slept he knew not, but, when he awoke later, Samuel Bompas stood beside him, his broad, kindly face expressing much concern. News travelled slowly, and the full account of Mark's troubles had not long reached the farm. Samuel Bompas had not been surprised, nothing women did had ever been known to surprise him: "for knowing her own mind and sticking to it"

his old sow would beat 'em hollow. "The skin of a sex," he called them, "hastily made and ill-considered at that."

The two cousins entered the house together. The big, unpretentious kitchen, with its air of homely comfort and hospitality, seemed to bid Mark welcome, and yet to make no undue fuss over his arrival. Bompas glanced at the young fellow's haggard face with renewed concern, but made no comment. A fine sizzling sound came from the back kitchen, and the dogs cocked their noses toward the door, curious and expectant. Mark, whose head had sunk upon his chest, suddenly looked up, feeling hungry; his cousin, noting the movement, smiled.

"Draw up your chair," he exclaimed, "there's nought like victuals for sprying a man on to finding himself."

The young fellow did as he was bid, surprised at the vigour with which he attacked the food, and the satisfaction that the mere act of eating gave to him. It seemed to him

a paltry kind of comfort for an aching heart, and yet he felt less miserable than he had on entering. Well, if bacon and fried potatoes could cure him of his trouble, so much the better, and he pushed out his plate for a second help. The meal over, Mark drew close to the fire and fell into a doze, and the farmer went out and left him. A bumble-bee flew in through the open window and droned its way through the silence which had descended on the big kitchen, alighting on the copper pans that glowed in rows along the walls. Mark's sleep deepened, a faint scent of thyme filled the room, and he dreamed that he was a child again, and lay on the floor of his mother's cottage, counting the bags of herbs which hung beside the tall dresser. He thought that it was night, and that he could hear the scream of the wild geese flying inland; and, still sleeping, it seemed to him that he rose and stole out, but he was not alone, for Luce was with him. Together they climbed the hill till they

came to the high lands, where, at fall of dusk, the pixies sport. The moon was big and swollen, so that strange things, other than pixies, might well be abroad; and when the two children reached the edge of a great wind-swept plain, they halted to turn their pockets inside out, for on him who tom-fools his pockets a pixie has no power. By some dire ill-luck, Mark's pockets had been sewn up, and as for Luce, she was so small, her dress did not grow a pocket. The agony of the moment was such that Mark's dream changed, and, in a flash, he had aged by several years, and found himself a man. He still stood looking across the wind-swept plain, but Luce was no longer by his side, and his heart was heavy, so that he wept even in his sleep. When he had gazed a long time across the plain, he saw before him a blood-red flower of such exceeding beauty, that he drew nearer to pick it. A sudden fear fell on him, for he knew, though none had said so, that the flower was the ven-

geance of God. Great as was his fear, even as great was his desire to gain possession of the flower. But when he put out his hand it was thrust back on him wounded and bleeding. Again and again he tried and failed, and still trying, awoke. The bee had found its way out through the open window, and the kitchen was more silent than ever, but standing in the doorway was the tall figure of a woman. Her hair was grizzled, the face, worn and lined, had yet that about it which bespoke youth rather than age. It seemed to Mark, looking at her, that never had he seen a face at once so striking and so sad; but sleep still lay heavy about him, it was as if she were part of his dream.

The woman advanced a few steps nearer. "Can 'ee tell me if a man o' the name o' Lupin lives anywhere in these parts?" she asked.

Mark started upright in his chair. Dreaming or awake he knew now that she was no ordinary woman, but the chosen instrument

of God's vengeance. While he still sought for words to answer her question, the broad figure of the old farmer suddenly appeared in the doorway. To Samuel Bompas' more prosaic mind his visitor seemed much the same as any other female, and equally unwelcome.

"My good woman," he said shortly, "now that you have found your way into the house I wud be much obliged if you wud do me the favour to find your way out."

"I was but axing a civil question," she replied, turning towards him.

"That I can well believe," he said, "for the axing o' questions is a woman's trade. But as for me, I ain't no encourager o' female cooriosity, so I'll thank 'ee to march, and that sharp."

The colour shot up in the woman's pale face. "Axing a question you've a right to know iddn't curiosity," she answered, and turning, went out as she was bid.

Mark gazed after the retreating figure,

while his mind, filled with vague conjectures, worked rapidly. "What do 'ee reckon her wanted wi' Lupin?" he asked, turning his eager eyes upon his cousin.

The old farmer slowly scratched his head. "Naught good; further than that, not being a fathomer o' females I can't undertake to say," he answered. "But there," he continued, after a moment, in a phlegmatic voice: "Men the like o' Ben Lupin always play up old Nick wi' the maidens. You have larned that to your cost. Happen Luce 'ull have to larn the same. Not that I have got aught personal agin the man, 'tis the way o' sich to act lightsome. Law jay! I don't jidge. The nature inside o' un forces un on."

Mark did not reply; the scene he had witnessed in the little white-washed cottage returned to him, and he sat staring out across the fields, his heart full of pity for the woman he loved. Had she been betrayed as he had been betrayed? Then his mood

changed, a fierce triumph took possession of him. It was not his own wrongs he was called upon to avenge, but hers. The thought was full of sweetness, and his face lit up in exultation.

The farmer regarded him with a mystified expression. "Whativer be there to make so merry over?" he asked.

Mark did not stay to answer, but, rising, hurried out of the house.

"Hivers!" exclaimed his cousin, glancing after him, "it takes a deal more than a good memory for the old to understand the young."

The road to Bere-Upton wound in and out among farm lands, the wind caught the cherry blossoms, flinging them full in his face. Nature, rejoicing in her vitality, seemed to call upon him to assert his manhood.

CHAPTER VII

THAT afternoon, when the grey mist drifted shore-wards, Lupin, a basket of codlin across his shoulders, climbed the hill on his way to sell fish. He was bare-footed, "his feet had never been christened wi' the rest o' un," and rebelled against the confinement of boots. Salt had dried in fine white scales upon his sinewy legs and on the trousers rolled up to the knee. He whistled to himself as he walked along; overhead the elms had burst into leaf, in front of him the road stretched bare and solitary, except for the figure of a woman on the horizon. Twilight gathering, he hastened his pace. Suddenly he ceased to whistle, and the woman, turning, came towards him.

"I knowed 'ee by that dreesh[1] note o' yourn," she said.

[1] Dreesh—thrush.

The colour forsook his face, the lines stiffening under the pressure of emotion.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Ain't I said that I have done wi' 'ee?"

"But Ben, I bain't the same woman that I was then."

"I have done wi' 'ee," he repeated.

She drew nearer, her tall figure dwarfed him; but when she spoke her voice sounded tremulous and pleading.

"I bain't no drunkard now," she exclaimed excitedly. "I've given it up, I've fought agin it all these long months. Times and times when the drink hunger was upon me I've flung myself down and gnawed the bare stones rather than give way to ut."

Lupin remained unmoved. "I have done wi' 'ee," he said.

A fruitless anger took possession of her. "'Tiddn't truth you're speaking," she cried. "You can't cast me off the same as thic."

"I alles ses what I mean," he answered, fixing his eyes on hers that glowed back at

him out of their sunken sockets like patches of dark-coloured fire.

"But Ben," she urged, "I ain't no drunkard now. 'Tis dree months since a drop o' spirits crossed my lips."

He laughed harshly. "Three months, what's three months! But if 'twas three score o' years I wudn't take 'ee back."

"I be your wife. You can't change ut. Us was married honest."

"But that don't bind me to live wi' 'ee."

She was silent, scanning his face in vain for some sign of relenting.

"'Twudn't be the same living wi' me now as 'twas afore," she said after a pause. "I've made the little cottage vitty, and the flowers be coming up trustful. There was a mort o' yaller crocus in the patch aside the door when I hiked off."

His determination to sever all connection with this woman corroded and ate away the pity her words awoke in his heart. "Hester," he answered, "have 'ee ever

knowed me go back from my word? 'Tiddn't no use argying. 'Tis just drawing away so much breath."

"But folks ain't got no right to a will the same as thic," she exclaimed helplessly.

A smile hovered for a moment about the corners of his mouth. "Life wi' such men as I be," he answered, "iddn't a consarn o' right and wrong, but jest whether us can drive through to what us wants."

She sank down beside the hedge. "Ben," she exclaimed, "you said once if us had a chile you wud feel nearer to me. Who knaws but that the Almighty 'ull give us a chile yet."

He turned away and his thoughts travelled back to Luce. "I have no need o' your chile," he answered coldly.

The tears gathered in her eyes and rolled one by one down her worn, white face.

"Don't 'ee say sich things as that," she exclaimed brokenly; "a chile's a chile."

A sudden whim seized him to tell her the

truth. "Aye," he answered, "and 'tis a chile that stands a-tween us." The pain of his revelation was so great that it deadened her power of suffering.

"I sort o' knowed that 'twud be me not you that ud bide faithful," she answered dully.

"Hester," he asked in a gentler voice, "why do 'ee care so much for my acting faithful? I've always treated 'ee harsh from the first."

She laughed a little bruised laugh. "No woman ever knowed yet what 'tis that makes her care for the likes o' you; but many another arter her 'ull follow the same road to zarrer."

Hester Lupin rose to her feet; far below, visible through a gap in the trees, was the White Cottage, and by a sudden mutual instinct the man and woman looked towards it.

"Who be thic maid that stands a-tween us?" she asked.

"Her lives over yonder," he answered slowly, "wi'in call o' the sea."

"And does her know the marriage lines 'ull never be hers!"

There was silence, and Lupin turned his dark, dare-devil eyes full on his wife. "Her has the marriage lines," he said.

Hester gave a short, quick cry. "They're mine afore the law. You dursn't give them to no other woman."

"Aye, the law's on your side, sure enough," he answered; "but time be on mine. You can gi'e me over to prison, but you can't tarn me back to 'ee when I come out o' it a free man."

"Oh Ben," she entreated, "tarn back to me now, and I'll never cast it at 'ee that you've acted wrongful."

His face hardened. "I've said my say and you must bide by it."

"But be your say zo banging girt a thing ez thic?"

"You can have your revenge," he an-

swered, a sudden gleam of satisfaction lighting up his dark face. "You can gi'e me over to the law."

"'Tiddn't revenge I want."

"Most women 'ud take it."

"I bain't no jidge o' t'others," she answered. "I can only speak for myself."

A sudden keen need of her revenge came to him. "But you must have more spirut," he exclaimed angrily. "Don't 'ee see I've acted black?"

"Spirut," she repeated, "I never put no vally on sich. 'Tis yourself I'm needing, and what should I gain by stabbing 'ee cowardsome?"

He moved impatiently. "'Twas just they obstinate one-sided ways o' yours that drove me wild from the fust," he said, turning as if about to leave her.

"Ben, Ben," she cried, clasping his hand, "kiss me jest wance afore you go."

For a moment he stood and looked upon her face, which seemed as if all the sorrow of

the world had been crushed into it, and a horror seized him of this woman capable of entertaining such suffering. He thrust her from him and hurried away into the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

Hester Lupin's parents had been small farmers, and had died when she was just verging on womanhood. The farm had been sold, and she had gone to live in a cottage near her old home. Well off for her station in life, and of striking appearance, many men had sought to marry her; but till the coming of Lupin, none had succeeded in touching her heart. She had first seen him in the woods felling trees, when she had gone there to fetch water from a stream, and had watched with a certain unconscious pleasure the big muscles standing out on his shoulders. Ben, with his quick eye for beauty, had not failed to note the tall, handsome woman; but the whim took him to pay no heed to her, except that he would fall to whistling as she drew

near, knowing well that she must needs stay and listen. Once though, while they stood thus, a little boy, sore of heart and weeping bitterly, came running past them through the wood; they, loving children, turned to follow it. Caught up in Lupin's arms the boy looked into the ugly brown face without fear and was comforted, and Hester, who was sad, for she bore always a hidden fear about with her, felt comforted also. From that time she began to love Ben. He married her, meaning to be faithful, but the excess of her love wearied him. Then did that which she had feared so long come on her, and she became a drunkard; and as for Lupin, he stole away through the dewy woods back to his old free roving life, and soon had forgotten her existence. She waited long for his return, fighting against her besetting weakness till she all but overcame it, then she set out to seek him. Now they had met and parted.

Left alone, Hester stood a long time gazing downward across the fields at the White

Cottage, then turning away she began to slowly climb the hill. Her home on the outskirts of a town lay some fifty miles further inland. Night fell; she tramped on, seeking the nearest station, but losing herself in the narrow country lanes that wound in and out and seemed to lead nowhere in particular. At last, overcome by fatigue, she sank down beside a gate. The moon flung its light on her bowed figure and on the tall hedgerows where, amidst a clatter of faint sounds, Spring crept rustling towards fruition. A sense of solitude fell on everything, till even the distant lowing of cattle seemed but a far-off echo of silence. The breeze died away. Sighing, the woman rose to resume her journey, and as she did so Mark Tavy came down the lane. All day he had been seeking Hester Lupin and now, with a pang of astonishment, he recognised in the tall commanding figure the woman who had broken in upon his dream. Halting opposite her he eagerly scanned her face.

"You seek Ben Lupin?" he said, "and I can tell you where to find 'un."

She started at the mention of her husband's name.

"I hate 'un," Mark continued. "Mayhap you do too." His voice as he spoke shook with passion, and drawing nearer he thrust his white contracted face close to hers.

"Why do you hate 'un?" she asked, shrinking back.

He burst into a rough laugh. "Cuz he stole the woman I love from me. That's why. But God'll punish 'un for it. God 'ull no let 'un bring black sorrow into other folks' lives for nought. His sins 'ull find 'un out. Even now they be tracking after 'un step for step."

She shivered and glanced round as if she heard the passing tread of avenging Justice, and Mark continued thickly: "'Tis yourself that be God's Appointed. 'Tis yourself that the Almighty has chosen to be the instrument o' His wrath. 'Tis

yourself that shall bear witness agin Ben Lupin."

"No, no," she protested hurriedly, "I'll have naught to do wi' ut."

"But you must speak out," Mark insisted. "There be innocent folk to be saved. There be other women consarned in this."

She strove to regain full control of her faculties before replying. "Who told 'ee I was consarned in this matter?" she asked at length.

There was a moment's silence, and then Mark determined to play a bold game. "You be consarned in it cuz you be Ben Lupin's wife," he answered. "Anyways," he added with a sudden lapse into weakness, "that is what I hold you to be."

She laughed defiantly. "Do 'ee reckon if I was his lawful wife I'd let un live wi' t'other woman?" she asked.

He scanned her face, vainly trying to read all that was written there. "I can't tell," he exclaimed indecisively.

She turned from him in contempt. "Vule," she exclaimed, "you bain't the sort that can afford to play wi' vengeance. Leave ut to the Almighty. You talk vorrid enough about 'un."

"I'll larn the truth in spite o' 'ee," he answered, shame sending the hot blood spurting across his brow. "I've acted fair all my life, and 'tiddn't to be believed that the Almighty is going to see me wronged."

Hester Lupin, who had walked away a few paces, stopped short and turned her sad, tragic face towards him. "There be more wrongs in the world than just yours and mine," she answered. "S'pose the Almighty in righting 'em wor fo'ced to let ours bide?" Then, without further speech, she left him and pursued her way.

CHAPTER IX

Hester Lupin went back to her own village, and when she reached her door it seemed to her as if she was about to enter the house of a stranger, and that her home lay far away in the little White Cottage by the sea. In the long, lonely nights that followed, she would wake suddenly, thinking she heard Ben Lupin's voice bidding her return; then she would rise from her bed and peer out into the darkness, but no sound would break the silence, for the call came not from her husband, but was the cry of her own longing. Despair fell upon her because she could neither silence the voice nor obey the summons. Then arose the temptation to seek forgetfulness in drink, but she resisted it because Ben Lupin might yet return, and she would not of her own will raise the barrier between them higher.

Seven months passed away, and one August morning as she stood gazing at the hills, beyond which lay the sea, the longing to look on the White Cottage, and on the face of the woman Ben Lupin loved, refused to be denied. She stole out, and, hardly conscious of what she did, followed the road leading to the station and entered the train which drowsed with her slowly past the fields on its way to Bere-Upton. The afternoon tide was just on the flow when she reached the cottage; far out the water crept shorewards in long green transparent lines. Hester drew closer and peered timidly across the garden at the small white house. The fuchsia bushes were in full bloom, hollyhocks stood up straight and tall beside the porch, the breeze bowing their heads and bearing a scent of sea things, passed her towards the hills. A sudden faintness seized Hester; she steadied herself against the gate, and as she did so, Luce opened the door and looked out. For a moment surprise held the girl silent,

then she advanced a few steps down the path.

"What ails 'ee?" she asked. "But then do come in, do, and rest yourzelf; you look most mazin' white and divered."

Hester made no reply, but raising her eyes fixed them on the younger woman's face. She marked with a pang of jealousy how the mysterious needs and claims of coming motherhood, while robbing the features of their freshness, had given them spiritual distinction, the fruit of long brooding thoughts. Grudgingly she traced the motherhood in the face of the woman whose child was yet unborn, and felt the cruel pangs of the barren in the presence of fertility. Then she turned aside, and looked towards the White Cottage, which should have been her home. Drawing herself upright, she advanced, and pushing back the door she, with a gesture superb in its pride, seemed to welcome Luce across the threshold. The girl followed in puzzled silence.

Within, the room was dark and cool. A sound of hammering came from a shed at the back of the house.

Hester shivered. "Who's over to there?" she asked, indicating the direction from whence the sound came.

"'Tiddn't no wan but Ben, my husband, that is," Luce answered. "He's making a bit o' a cradle," she added shyly.

There was silence. Hester sank down on a seat and covered her eyes as if to shield them from the light.

Watching her, Luce caught the glitter of a gold ring on the upturned hand. She drew nearer. "I zee," she exclaimed, "that you be a married woman yoursel'. Wor'ss ever fearzome afore the chile was borned to 'ee? Sort of longing for un and yet kind o' timid o' his coming?"

The elder woman straightened herself with a jerk. "I niver had no child, on'y wanted un," she answered stiffly.

"Ah," exclaimed Luce, "'tis wonderful

kooris feeling un wi' 'ee by day and by night and all the time being held back from the claiming o' un afore the world. Eh but he lies close, and when the time is here for his coming he'll not be more my lad than he be now. Still," she added softly, "I shud dearly like to hannel un and show un to his vether."

There was no reply, and after a moment Luce picked up some needlework from the table.

"Zee," she added, bending forward, "this is just a little snip o' a shift I've bin making for un. 'Tis fine and soft, a chile's skin do fret that powerful easy. Thic be the back, and you lays un down upo' your knee and mops it round un, zo."

At this moment Ben Lupin entered the room unobserved, and stood half-hidden by the tall clock near the door. Hester, pushing aside the work, sat staring straight in front of her. Slowly her large dark eyes filled with tears. Thinking of her own barrenness,

the girl's words sounded as a cry of triumph over her.

"'Tis cruel work talking o' childer to the childless," she exclaimed.

"Zo 'tis, zo 'tis," Luce admitted with ready sympathy. "But then you iddn't noways old, mayhap you'll have a chile o' yer own, zome day. I cud find it in my heart to wish it for 'ee. Like enough, too, your man do weary for a lad the zame ez yoursel'."

Hester rose to her feet. "He's long since given over wearying," she exclaimed harshly.

"He must be terrible t'other from Ben," Luce answered.

The elder woman laughed. "Do you reckon he's zo different?"

"Ess, fay."

"I knowed a Ben, but he wor a hard man. Waiting comed ill to him."

"Poor soul!" exclaimed Luce. "My lad be always tendersome wi' me, though he do act high-handed and spirity to other folks at times."

"You have niver tried un. 'Tiddn't no childless hearth that he'll be axed to sit by year in year out."

"No; but he's mortal jealous o' the child that's coming for all o' thic. Whiles I be fo'ced to wait till he has dropped off to zlape afore I as much as dare call the little 'un to mind. But then I don't worry. I knaws well enough that when wance the chile is here Ben ull no grudge him aught in reason, and as to the easyfying o' life, a lad looks to have that droo his mother."

For a while no sound was audible in the room but the slow, laboured ticking of the eight-day clock, and then Hester stepped forward and caught Luce by the arm.

"Do 'ee reckon," she exclaimed fiercely, "that life 'ull always run along smooth for 'ee, the zame ez it has? Haven't 'ee niver heard o' zarrer? Who be you and yours that you shud hope to escape it? Do 'ee think cuz the chile lies safe agin your heart now that the day 'ull niver come when he'll stray

far from 'ee? Do 'ee count that the Ben you have larned to trust in the saft months o' courting 'ull be the zame droo life?"

The younger woman drew away her arm and sank down on the nearest chair.

"It scares me to hear 'ee talk zo," she protested. "What do mak' 'ee do it? Zee, I am all o' a trembly."

"I don't want to scare 'ee," Hester answered in a sad voice. "I don't wish 'ee no harm, nay, more'n that, I cud find it in my heart to wish 'ee wull. To add to your zarrer 'ull take nought from the weight o' mine."

She ceased speaking, and her eyes fell on Ben Lupin. For a moment the husband and wife looked at one another, then silently she passed him by and left the house. He turned and gazed after her, his face white and contracted. A sudden gust of wind caught the door, shutting it with a slam, and he stood and stared mechanically at the bare panels. True, his secret still remained undisclosed, but not till that moment had he

realized how great was the gift he had been willing to accept, and his manhood trembled beneath the weight of a craven gratitude. He had never analysed his love for Luce, nor understood how rapid had been its growth, or how closely his happiness had become bound up with hers. He had believed himself strong enough to do wrong and bear the punishment of his wrong-doing; but standing, a silent spectator of the scene between the two women, a novel sensation had come to him; for the first time in his life he had been afraid. His whole nature revolted against the harbouring of fear, but he could not thrust it from him, stronger than his pride was this strange new need of happiness. Unobserved by him it had sprung up in his heart, sheltered by the presence there of the one woman he had ever learned to love. He dared not risk the loss of her affection, and yet the failing to face that risk involved the surrender of everything that hitherto he had held most dear. His pity for Hester died

within him, he could not afford to be pitiful; but still dumbly wrestling with this strange new problem he came forward to where Luce sat, and flung himself down beside her on the worn horsehair settle.

She slipped her hand into his. "Oh, lad," she exclaimed, "I've been that scart."

Lupin allowed her fingers to lie in his palm, but took no notice of her remark. Surprised at his silence, she scrutinised his face more closely.

"What be 'ee worriting over?" she asked. "You don't look noways yerzulf."

He did not answer. The words sounded in his ears, but he remained blank to their meaning.

A fear seized Luce; she raised herself, and, leaning forward, caught both his hands. "Thic furren woman wor nought to 'ee?" she asked.

He stared dully into the girl's face, but returned no answer. She flung herself upon her knees before him.

"Ben, Ben," she exclaimed, shaking him with all her strength, as if she must arouse him out of the strange lethargy into which he had fallen, "What wor 'ee doing all the long years you were away from me?"

"Why do 'ee ax thic now?" he said at length.

"I don't know," she answered feebly, "only I'm afeard."

The words ended in a cry, as a curious sharp pain tore its way through her body, and she fell sobbing against his knee. He lifted her up, and carrying her into the next room, put her on the bed. After a while the pain lost some of its fierceness; she begged him to lie down beside her, and when he had done so she placed her face close to his and her tears fell upon his cheeks.

CHAPTER X

It so chanced that when Hester left the White Cottage Septimus Spong was seated on a neighbouring fence. Her pale face, with its expression of tragic suffering, at once attracted his attention, and, being a man of some little curiosity, he decided to follow the stranger. Before slipping down from the fence, however, he stayed a moment to knock the ashes out of his pipe. Day was setting towards dusk when he turned in pursuit, but the tall figure in front of him was outlined clearly enough against the hill. Lupin had few relatives, and Spong, running over the list of them in his mind, could think of no one but an aunt in Australia.

"Well, 'tis to be hoped her's sommat more'n a relative," he murmured; "but the

ins and outs o' things be pleasurable knowing anyways."

He quickened his pace, and, as he did so, Hester Lupin swerved and fell in a heap across the path. Hurrying forward, Spong saw that she had fainted; he raised her to a sitting position, and her head sank back among the ferns on the hedge side. The situation was developing almost too rapidly, and he stood looking down at her in puzzled silence. After a moment she opened her eyes.

"Do you reckon you cud git as far as the Lupins' cottage if I wor to lend 'ee a hand?" he said.

She shuddered. "I'll bide where I be for a bit, and then I'll hike home along," she answered.

Spong's curiosity, which had flagged under the stress of circumstances, was at once re-aroused. "Do 'ee live far from here?" he asked. "I fancied you wor a furrener."

She closed her eyes and appeared not to

hear the question. Somewhat baffled, he glanced at her hand to see if she wore a wedding ring, and then back at her face, the sadness of which stirred his heart with pity. He felt ashamed of prying into her affairs, and, turning away, looked sheepishly down the lane. After a while she raised herself, and asked him to help her as far as the village. They crept forward at a slow pace, she leaning heavily on his arm, till at length they reached a small inn called "The Fisherman's Desire."

"Mayhap I shud do well to rest here a bit," she said.

"Ess, fay," he agreed eagerly; "a drop o' spirruts 'ud put fresh life into 'ee."

A curious expression, half eager, half afraid, crossed her face, but she made no comment and they entered the inn together. The room was empty, and Spong went in search of the landlord, returning after a few minutes with a bottle of rum and two glasses on a tray. He poured out some of

the spirits and pushed it across the table to Hester. She put out her hand and drew it closer, but did not drink. The smell of the spirits filled the room. Leaning back in her chair she closed her eyes; her hands, gripped tight together, were folded on her knee. From time to time her throat twitched as if she were swallowing. Suddenly she bent forward, thrust her lips to the glass, sucking up the liquid with a hideous sound of hurry. Spong watched her in dismay, but she had forgotten his presence.

Seizing the bottle, she filled and refilled her glass with pure spirits. An unsexed expression came into her face, the wan cheeks seemed to cave together; it was as if some oubliette of the soul had opened through which her womanhood had sunk out of sight.

The sweat began to gather on Spong's forehead; he wiped it off with his hand. A fear of being found in this woman's company beset him. He wondered what his neighbours would think.

"Law jay!" he exclaimed, rising from his seat, "who cud ha' believed it o' her, law jay!"

Then Hester's mood changed. Bending forward, she caught Septimus Spong by the arm, thrusting him back into his chair.

"What have I zed?" she cried. "What have I told 'ee? No wan must knaw that I be Ben Lupin's wife." A flood of maudlin tears silenced her for a moment. "Who is it," she continued, glancing round, "that keeps on a-zaying I ba wife to Ben Lupin over to the White Cottage? I tull 'ee no wan must knaw cuz they wad up and tull it to the law, and the law iddn't to be trusted wi' sich things; the law 'ud put un in prison, that's wat the law 'ud be after doing."

She was silent a moment, and stretching out a trembling hand, searched vaguely round for the bottle of spirits.

"Yes," she said, "I be his wife, not her; and the chile that is coming shud ha' been

my chile. Who told 'ee the chile's my chile?" She stopped speaking, and her eyes fell on her wedding ring; she twisted it round. "I can't understand," she continued; "there's sommat I must have forgot."

Overwhelmed with astonishment, Spong sat silently staring at the drunken woman. She eyed him dazedly, a slow smile broadening her face, her head nodding. After a moment the upper half of her body slid forward, first slowly, then with a jerk on to the table.

The postman waited no longer, but rose and fled. Once back in his own cottage he tried to collect his thoughts and review the situation. Spong, by nature, was what the villagers called an "interfering man"; he liked, as he called it, to "hold the strings of things." Now it seemed as if his desire was about to be granted, and yet there was much in the situation that did not please him. He could have wished to have learned the

truth in any other way than the way he had; neither could he disabuse his mind of the thought that the drunken woman had tried to guard her secret even at the moment when she was betraying it, and this knowledge filled him with uneasiness. Still, in common justice to the village and his own intelligence, the truth must be told and morality avenged. There could be little doubt that it was a grand part that he was being called upon to play, though he could have wished for a more overwhelming sense of righteousness in the playing of it.

At last he decided to go to bed and sleep on the question, having learnt by experience that a man can see further into the truth after a good night's rest. Sleep, however, refused to visit him, and the soft yellow dawn spreading across the fields found him still undecided as to his ultimate course of action; on one point alone had he come to a decision, and that was he

would go down to Ben Lupin and tell him what he thought of his behaviour.

He rose and dressed; opening a chest of drawers he drew out his best coat; there was nothing, he knew from experience, like being sure of one's personal appearance when admonishing others, and Spong felt very sure of himself indeed as he walked across the fields to the White Cottage. The door was open, smoke pushing out from the chimney; he was surprised, for the hour was still early.

A moment later, Lupin hurried down the path, thrusting his arms into his coat as he ran, jumped the gate at the end of the garden and rushed away in the direction of the village.

The little postman's heart gave a thud of dismay. What was the reason of this haste on Lupin's part? Had he been warned? Was he attempting to escape from the hands of the law? At the thought Spong's determination hardened. He advanced down

the garden path and rapped at the door. There was no answer, he was about to repeat the knock when his ear caught the sound of moaning. An unpleasant thrill passed through him and he hesitated whether to advance or retreat. After a moment, however, the braver counsel prevailed; he entered the cottage and softly pushed open the bedroom door, the latch of which was unfastened. A dim light entered with him and Spong could see the figure of a woman huddled together in the corner of the wooden bed. Her face was buried in the pillow, and she sobbed as one who suffered greatly, for she was travelling through the pains to the joys of motherhood.

"Ben, Ben," she moaned, "what makes 'ee bide away zo long? I'm scart wi'out 'ee. Oh, lad, I want 'ee to hold my hand and tell me 'tis nobut our chile, your chile and mine, that mayhap the pain won't be zo mortal bad to bear. I'm fear'd to bide here all alone, I'm fear'd, I'm fear'd."

Spong crept out of the house, his eyes full of tears, and his round, puckered face redder than usual.

"Law jay!" he exclaimed, leaning against the fence. "I cudn't find it in my heart to part 'em—things must jest bide ez they ba."

CHAPTER XI

Most people entertain an idle belief that they can keep a secret if they are so minded, little realizing that not good-will alone but a rare amount of self-repression is needed to accomplish this feat successfully. It is probable that if Spong had not determined, under no circumstances, to reveal Hester Lupin's secret he might have found his task easier of achievement; but having once taken the fatal resolution, the secret remained uppermost in his mind and seemed ever on the point of accidentally slipping into the light of day. Three weeks passed, however, and no one in the village was the wiser for Spong's discovery. The effort necessary to maintain silence was so great that once, on meeting Lupin accidentally in the street, the

little postman pulled up short with an involuntary expectation of being thanked, and when Lupin passed without so much as vouchsafing a glance in his direction, Septimus Spong's heart hardened and he muttered the word "gratitude" in a tone of fine sarcasm. Later the same day, returning from his rounds, he met Mark Tavy, and for the first time in his life felt a sense of fellowship for the young fellow. Mark turned and walked beside him, and, after a moment's silence, the postman burst out:

"That there Ben Lupin is a black 'un and no mistake." The speech was so sudden and unexpected, that Mark straightened himself much as if he had received a blow in the body.

"What makes 'ee say that?" he asked.

But the little postman had already begun to regret having spoken, and shut his lips close to avoid further indiscretions.

Mark scanned his face eagerly. Since the meeting with Hester he had not ceased to

hope that he would some day alight on facts detrimental to Lupin's reputation.

"It's my belief," he said at last, "that you have come across that woman."

Spong wheeled round and looked at him. "Have 'ee zeed her yursulf?"

"Yes, and had speech with her too."

"Law jay!" exclaimed Septimus, "and wor her drunk?"

"Drunk? No, sober as a charch."

"Well, then," replied the postman slowly, "I reckon her wur more zilent than speechful. Poor soul, her has need to ha' a care o' her company."

"What do 'ee mean by that?"

"Nought, nought," said Spong, once more resuming his way. "Only when I calls to mind how her let on when her had took a drap too much and the things she zed. Why, I wor that gapnesting and overtook you might ha' runned me droo wi' wan o' they long skewers o' the widdy's, and I shudn't ha' taken no notice whatsoiver."

Anxiety to know more sharpened Mark's wits, a sudden inspiration came to him; he glanced round, there was no one in sight. "Septimus," he said, "you be a careful man and a man folks ha' learnt to trust."

"Ess, fay," Spong interrupted. "I be all that and more."

".You see a deal further than your neighbours."

"'Tis no but the truth."

"And you wud ha' made a better p'liceman than the wan us ha' got." In making the assertion Mark well knew that he was falling in with one of the little postman's cherished illusions.

Spong's face brightened. "I niver had no 'pinion o' Constable Garge in my life," he said emphatically.

There was a moment's pause. Mark drew in his breath; he was about to make a bid for the secret.

"Do 'ee reckon," he said, turning quickly and facing his companion, "that if so be it

had been you that had the acting for the law in this here village, Ben Lupin wud be the free man to-day that he be?"

"No, begore," Spong burst out, "he wud ha' been jailed this week ago, sarving his five years for bigamy."

The complete success of his stratagem left Mark surprised rather than elated, but, after a while, a bitter joy filled him. "Luce iddn't wife to Ben Lupin after all," he exclaimed, with exultation.

"Well, don't bawl it out so that the whole parish can hear 'ee, anyway," Spong remonstrated, throwing an uneasy glance behind him. "Law jay," he continued, after a pause, "'twud be a narrer heart that cudn't find room in it to pity both o' 'em, wife and maid; for how the one is to be righted wi'out it going rare hard for t'other poor zoul, be more'n I can zee."

But Mark was in no mood to weigh such a question in the balance. "Things won't bide as they be," he answered.

Spong's round face lengthened. "Don't 'ee be after making no mistake," he replied with vigour. "Tiddn't no matter to be lightly meddled with, and the man that takes it on hiszulf to interfere ull ez like ez not ha' the breaking o' Luce Myrtle's heart for his pains. You can't strip a maid sich ez her be o' decency and rispact and reckon to be thanked for your trouble."

The blood, cramped into the young fisherman's veins, rose and beat against the walls of his brain. "A lad cud make an honest woman o' her," he said huskily.

A vision of Luce as he last saw her, lying in the old wooden bed, rose before Spong.

"Mayhap her wud feel a deal honester left ez her be," he answered, after a pause. "Zims almost ez if it took more'n the law and the Church to make folks man an' wife."

Mark did not answer. The two men strode along, the one with a heart filled with pity, the other with bitterness. At Widow Flutter's door they parted, and

Mark continued his way to the quay where his boat was anchored. Jumping on board, he hoisted sail and steered out to sea. He wanted to be alone, he wanted to think, but his mind, paralyzed by emotion, could assimilate nothing, and his twitching lips formed the same sentence over and over again.

"Her isn't no wife of his," he muttered; "her isn't no wife o' his."

The boat, noseing her way through a head sea, rose and fell; he shifted the sail, laid her over upon another tack and she swung round, running almost parallel with the cliffs. To leeward, the White Cottage, the setting sun full on the small windows, stood looking down upon him with red, shiny eyes. For weeks he had avoided glancing in that direction, but to-day he flung back his head and stared up defiantly; and the little cottage, as some living thing, seemed to realize the change in him. It grew less self-confident; the light fading, its eyes looked

no better than the windows of a dead soul. A sense of triumph filled Mark; he longed to return, and in retaliation for the many indignities thrust upon him, to seize Luce and tear her from this cottage that had forfeited the right of sanctity.

"I cud gi'e her an honest name," he said. Yet, even as he spoke, Spong's words re-echoed through his mind: "Mayhap her wud feel honester left ez her is."

Such an attitude, so illogical and yet so like a woman, filled him with bitterness. Gladly would he have imagined Luce as rising superior to it, but the faith failed him. The law was on his side, but the law was of scant account among women, they neither understood nor heeded it. Then he tried to juggle with facts. What right, he asked himself, had he to withhold the truth from Luce? If she failed to value her good name, it behoved him to guard it the more closely. To and fro, he wove the woof of his desire between the warp of fact, till all

that was most false in the picture startled him by its verisimilitude. Slowly night closed in upon him, and as the dusk deepened he seemed to span more nearly the gulf that lay between Luce's happiness and his own.

"Zome day her'll thank me for speaking out," he said. The words startled him; he did not know his purpose was already fixed. He glanced back, the land was hidden in the general greyness, nothing was visible but the wide stretch of sea around, and the wide stretch of sky above. A sense of his own insignificance came to him, his spirit shrank altogether.

He flung himself down into the bottom of the boat.

"O God!" he sobbed out, "Ben's given me turrible cause to hate un—and her was to ha' been my wife."

Yet this confession of an unworthy motive was but tentative and half-hearted, for it was part of his faith that he was a good man and that his cause was just.

CHAPTER XII

Constable Garge was seated in the arm-chair before the fire when Spong entered Widow Flutter's cottage. An expression of solid contentment rested on the policeman's face, his long legs were stretched out at full length, his corn-coloured beard curled across his chest, spreading itself out as some great tuft of seaweed afloat on a wave. The pang of jealousy that shot through Spong at the sight of his rival was followed by a soothing feeling of triumph; he hugged his secret more closely, and eyed his gigantic rival with contempt born of a wider knowledge of the affairs of the village. There was a short silence while the widow, her plump, fresh face a little flushed, busied herself in pouring Spong out a cup of tea. Glancing about him, his attention was attracted by five large,

coloured glass balls reposing on a table near the fire.

"Why," he exclaimed, drawing his chair forward, "whativer have us got here?"

"Nought less than a present," replied the widow, smiling; "the same ha' been brought from Barnstaple fair, not longer ago than the night afore last."

Spong's contempt for his rival deepened. "Glass balls," he said, "wor a poor exchange for the doing o' dooty."

The reply did not seem exactly to the widow's taste.

"There's dooty and dooty," she answered with some sharpness; "and the coloured balls have ez much meaning attached to 'em ez any Christian, for all they be made o' glass. And if you doubt my word, you can ax Constable Garge."

"Law jay!" said Spong, whose temper was rising, "if I wor to put a question, 'twou'd be ez to the use o' sich trash."

"Wull, wull," Constable Garge interposed

in an even voice, "they wor made more for ornament than for use, I reckon, baing, so to speak, things o' taste. Leastways, that wor how I put it to the missis at the stall. 'Mother,' ses I, 'I be thinking o' gitting married, and I want sommat wi' a look to it.'"

At the word "married," Spong gave a loud, indignant snort; but the constable, appearing not to notice the interruption, proceeded calmly with his tale.

"Then ses she to me, 'You couldn't go for to do a wiser thing than buy they five coloured balls. There's the blue wan,' she ses, 'the same colour ez the stripes across Her Majesty's breast; red, that 'ull put 'ee in mind of battle, murder and sudden death, the same being, ez the Prayer-Book ses, always in our midst; green stands for the Emerald Isle, a part o' England, tho' I've heard a place wi' ways; yaller 'ull tell 'ee ivery Saturday night to put your money faithful in your wife's hand; purple pictures life, not over-

full o' zarrer or o' joy, but fair eating and clothes to taste.' Wi' that I paid down my money, thinking I cudn't do a much wiser thing."

The constable relapsed into silence. Spong, for his part, was more impressed than he cared to admit. He had had a sneaking admiration for the glass balls from the first moment that he set eyes on them, but the wealth of metaphorical meaning attributed to them by their donor almost took his breath away. He realized too that this well-chosen present had been the means by which his rival had ingratiated himself with the widow, and the knowledge increased his desire to humiliate Constable Garge in her presence.

"If I chose to put tongue to speech," he burst out, "I cud tell 'ee that ez wud make 'ee think o' sommat else azide glass balls."

At this remark the widow showed signs of evident curiosity, but Constable Garge merely spread himself out more comfortably in his chair, raised one heavy eyelid, gazed a mo-

ment at the angry little postman, and then, without further ado, dropped off to sleep.

"Zlape away, you banging girt bumble-head!" exclaimed Spong in a voice of extreme irritation; "wan wud reckon, to see 'ee, that a constable's vally lay in his stomach and not in his wits."

A loud snore was the only reply; even the widow seemed a trifle surprised.

"Well, well," she remarked, "he's done a hard day's work, no doubt."

"Wark!" Spong repeated, "'tis precious little wark he do do. Why, if things were left to he, all the jails wud go empty, and ivery rapscallion in the country-side 'ud be free to ride in a coach."

The widow was no friend to backbiting. "La, la! Mr. Spong," she exclaimed, "how you do run on agin him, to be sure."

"And reason I have for the zame."

"Wull," she answered, rising from her seat, "will 'ee take a drap o' sloe gin if I wor to pour it out for 'ee?"

At the mention of sloe gin, the sleeping form of Constable Garge twitched violently.

"I don't so much mind if I do," Spong answered in a pleasanter tone.

The gin was brought, and as the liquid trickled with a plop-plop into the glasses, a sound more resembling a groan than a snore came from the policeman's chair.

"How heavy he do dream, poor man!" Widow Flutter remarked, glancing at her recumbent admirer.

"Thick wits zlape sound," Spong answered; "and thick-witted he be and no mistake. Why"—and the little postman edged his chair nearer to the widow as he spoke—"I cud tell 'ee zommat that he wi' all his prying ain't found out, and zommat he wud gi' a deal to know."

"La!" said the widow, "what a pusson for information you do be, Mr. Spong."

"I marks what I zees, that is what I does, Widow Flutter."

"And yet 'tiddn't you that be constable,"

she said; adding after a pause, however, thoughtfully, "but there iddn't a finer-built man in all the village, no one wi' more length o' leg than Constable Garge."

"What's length o' leg put aside length o' wit?" remarked Spong testily.

"To be sure," the widow answered in a soothing voice, "there comes times when us needs the both."

"If so be us has 'em to fall back on, Widow Flutter, always providing thic," Spong observed. "Why, there is a man in this village I cud jail at this very minute ez sure ez I sit here. He wud need more'n his own share o' wit to escape me, but he ain't got nought to fear from Constable Garge, and can snap his vingers at the law the same ez honest folk."

"La," exclaimed the widow, "what dreadful tales you do tell. It quite makes the cold shivers run down my back only to hear 'ee. And who may the pussen be?"

"A'tween ourselves, no other man than Ben Lupin."

"Ben Lupin! Well, I niver. I've always heard folks say he poached."

"'Tiddn't poaching," Spong answered with gravity befitting the disclosure he was about to make. "'Tis sommat a long way wuss than poaching."

"Dear, dear!"

There was a moment's pause, during which Spong drained his glass and set it back on the table with a bang.

"'Tis bigamy," he exclaimed in an impressive whisper.

The widow threw up her hands. "Heaven presarve us!" she ejaculated. "And Luce that I've known from a child, and her a mother. I be more sorry than I can zay. But howiver did you come to larn sich a thing? That's what I should like to knaw."

Thus adjured, Spong related the whole story, from beginning to end. Barely had

he finished before the constable woke up, and remarked that he believed that he must have been asleep. "But," he said, "he cud smell liquor all droo his dreams."

This last statement brought a smile once more to the widow's face. She fetched an extra glass, and when Constable Garge had drunk to the "Health, happiness, and general good sense o' the company," the party broke up; the two rivals returning home, and the widow, sighing more than once over the contrariness of things that allowed the Ben Lupins of this world to ruin the lives of honest, self-respecting women, lit her candle and retired upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER XIII

On the hill above the White Cottage, and about a quarter of a mile from the village stood Bellow House, generally known as the Great House. It was a big, rambling grey stone building, exposed on all sides except the north, where the wind was planted out by a larch wood. A stranger approaching from the road never lost sight of the house, which stared at him down the bare hill slopes as if it had no secrets to hide, and expected a like frankness from all comers. There was a touch of the same sentiment about the old Squire, who loved a plain fact plainly told, and was liberal of everything except speech. It was to the Squire that Mark now turned. Once having made up his mind to reveal the secret, he anticipated

scant difficulty in putting his decision into practice, yet, when he passed the cottage on his way to the Great House a curious uneasiness took possession of him, and he wished his errand well over and himself well out of it.

Luce was seated beneath the low, thatched porch, sewing, and the baby, asleep, lay stretched out upon her knees. She glanced up at Mark's approach and beckoned to him. He passed on, taking no notice; then, with a sudden change of intention, turned and came back and stood leaning across the wicket gate. A big apple-tree all a-blow with bees and blossom thrust its scent between him and the house and seemed in some subtle way to personify the sweet fragrance of the home it sheltered.

The peacefulness of the scene struck the young fisherman as being unnatural, uncalled for—he could not harmonize it with the errand on which he was bent.

Pushing open the gate, he came close to Luce, scanning her face; surely Lupin's love must have stamped its desecration there. She raised her eyes; pity, tenderness, affection, were all in the gaze she returned to his. He tried to pierce deeper to the well-spring of her being, but of that which he sought he could find no trace. Bitter disappointment filled him, it was to be his sacred right and duty to rehabilitate this woman in her own eyes and in the world's, to wipe away the stains from her motherhood with his own good name, and she seemed so unconscious of the hard straits she was in, that she half led him to doubt her need of help. He glanced from her to the interior of the scantily furnished kitchen, and realized, not without pride, that it would have looked less bare had he been master, for he had put by a full fifty pounds so that his wife should never have cause to hang down her head before her neighbours.

Luce had known of this store, for week by week as he had added his bits of money to the heap in the small iron-clamped money-box, he had told her the exact sum the chest contained, and would make her take it out and count it afresh for the mere pleasure that the click-click of the coin gave him—often too, he had been vexed because she had not shown a similar enthusiasm.

The thought came to him that poverty was a fine sharpener of men's appetites, and that Luce, having gone hungry, would have a keen taste for the once despised gold. A half smile crossed his lips as he turned and looked down at her; there was sweetness in gratifying the needs of this woman who, up till now, had seemed to have scant needs to gratify.

"Luce," he said, "I have they fifty pounds by me still."

She smiled across at him, only half grasping his meaning.

"What fifty pounds be thic?" she asked.

There was a moment's pause while Mark tried ineffectually to smother his resentment at her lack of comprehension. He had imagined her tracking him thought by thought, and, as it were, fingering the money over and over in her mind.

"The lil' place looks half starved," he exclaimed contemptuously.

She did not answer, but, bending down, kissed the sleeping child. His face contracted, anger and misery fought for possession of his heart.

"Do you love the chile?" he asked in a rough voice.

She rose and laid the baby in the cradle before replying.

"Lad," she said, putting her hand upon his arm, "do be friends wi' me, do, and then I do think I shall have nothing left to wish for."

"Friends," he repeated, shaking himself free. "Who cares aught for sich ez thic?"

An expression half sad, half tender, came into her face.

"Us wor niver more'n friends, Mark," she answered gently; "but us have been friends iver since us wor childer."

His heart rose in rebellion against her. It seemed to him that she was trying to cheapen his love, to class it out from being love at all.

"'Tis zommat a mort different from thic that I veel for 'ee, and you know it," he replied.

She turned from him to the open window. "Zims ez if you must be mistook, lad," she said softly.

He did not answer. The pity which filled him a few short moments back had departed, and in its place a dull anger burnt in his heart. For the first time the desire came to him to punish this woman who was so indifferent to his love, to teach her through suffering the lesson that kindness failed to instil.

"I must be gwaying," he exclaimed. "I've zommat to zay to the Squire up to the Great

House. Maybe you and Lupin 'll have cause to hear o' me again," and swinging round on his heel, he left the cottage.

He did not regret having spoken thus hastily, the blood burned too hot in his heart and brain for regret to find a place there, and yet he had meant to keep his visit to the Great House a secret between the old Squire and himself. On he went, nursing his anger, drawing quick visions of the future when Luce should have learned at last to distinguish the sham Lupin from the real man. Bared to his sins, Ben Lupin would be ugly showing. Mark gloried in the thought of the revelation that was in store; he would not have rung down the curtain now for the plaudits of God and man—the stage was set, the actor had but to walk on.

Pushing back the gate, Mark entered Bellow grounds; then, for no apparent reason, his mood changed, his anger died, and he was possessed by chill foreboding. A distaste seized him for the bare hill slopes against

which every object showed prominently, and the first glance at which sufficed to reveal that he was not the only man that had business with the Squire that morning. Ahead, marching up the drive with a fine disregard of the fact that his gigantic body jutted out in high relief, was Constable Garge. A pang of envy shot through Mark. A sudden question leaped into his mind. He knew well that this man had often been called upon to denounce the guilty: on this morning the constable's errand and his own might not be dissimilar. "What then," he asked himself, "made the man so at ease?" No sense of secret shame seemed to cling to him; he walked with the free gait of the honest.

Unconsciously, the young fisherman turned sea-wards—a longing came to him to be out among the big, broad-breasted waves and feel the sharp lick of their tongues upon his face. He would be at ease out there, would feel no doubt as to the issue, and yet he had had many a hard tussle with the sea when

neither knew whether they fought as friends or foes.

He stood for a long time staring across the water, his eyes following a track of light till it vanished in the curves of the horizon. Often when a child, he had dreamed of that track of light, and, waking to find darkness lying on everything, would make believe that the broad gold band was still without, ribboning the whole earth. Other dreams returned to him till his heart grew heavy with the weight of them. What had manhood brought to be compared to those boyish visions that had struck out towards the unknown future in just such another long gold track of light? Thinking of childhood, its hopes, desires, its straining towards the nobler, a distrust of himself as he now was came to him. It was as if the child, returning again and taking on the flesh of the man, found the garment unhallowed. Mark gazed into his heart with clear-seeing eyes and shuddered at what he saw; for a brief mo-

ment, that seemed to stretch on for years, he was permitted to stand face to face with his own spirit—bent, distorted, shrivelled, maimed, it cried to him through dumb lips for more light, more room to expand, to grow—it could not breathe in the sodden air of his desires.

Far below, at the hill's foot, stood the White Cottage. He glanced from it to the Great House and, doing so, a question shot through his mind. Should he go back before it was too late, leave his errand undone, and Lupin to other hands for punishment? This respectability that he would force on the woman he loved at the cost of discrediting her in the world's eyes and her own, what was it but the desire to drive her into marriage with himself? Was there, then, no price too high for her to pay for the satisfying of his need of her? Surely, surely, he had seen the matter in another light than that; it was for her he was fighting, not for himself.

Once unbound, however, the eyes of his conscience refused to be bandaged back from seeing, nor could he again deceive himself. He had reached the parting of the ways, and the Mark Tavy that he loved so well—the Mark who had stood by the Almighty when the Almighty had been loath to stand by him, was about to plant his foot on the wrong road. Slowly the beads of sweat gathered on the young fisherman's forehead. How often had he not taken it as some sweet-scented garment to cover the nakedness of his many failures! We can all sin, but we cannot afford to count the cost beforehand, and Mark flung aside the reckoning lest, when the day of payment arrived, he should have already paid full measure and running over.

Thrusting his hat down over his eyes, he hurried forward. If this thing was to be done, then let him get the strain of waiting off his mind. A few minutes later he was in the presence of the Squire who sat leaning

far back in his chair, the tips of his fingers pressed together, his brow creased in thought. He paid no heed to Mark, appearing unaware of his presence. Cap in hand, the young fisherman stood looking down at the short, thick-set figure, awaiting the moment when he should receive permission to explain his errand. The speech which he had prepared beforehand seemed to tickle his tongue, and he had a ridiculous fear lest, at some unexpected noise, the words might bob off, leaving their import to take care of itself. As the moments ticked slowly past, the strain of the long drawn-out silence became almost unbearable to him.

At last the Squire raised his head and sent a cold, questioning glance across at the young fisherman.

"Well?" he said.

There was no reply from Mark, his carefully prepared speech seemed nailed to his tongue and as devoid of meaning as a scarecrow left in a field when the ripened corn

has been cut and carried. At last he found words.

"I've always," he exclaimed, "acted upright and God-fearing." He stopped short, bewildered, he had come to indict Ben Lupin, not to vindicate himself.

The Squire raised his eyebrows but made no comment, and Mark—anger, jealousy, bitterness, the need of Luce's love and the fear of parting with self-respect making a strange turmoil in his heart—stood looking at this imperturbable old man, who, unmoved and critical, gazed back at him and seemed in some subtle way to represent Mark's own long dormant conscience. A craving for help came to Mark, and he stretched out his hand as one seeking support.

"Sir," he said thickly, "if a man had acted black to 'ee and you had it in your power to do the same by 'un, what wud 'ee do?"

The question, thrust so unexpectedly upon him, startled the Squire; he sat up and

waited a moment before answering. A slow smile crossed his face.

"Well," he exclaimed, "I know what I should be inclined to do."

Mark wasted no time upon the answer.

"Sir," he continued, "s'posing thickey man had robbed 'ee of the wan woman that wor dear to 'ee, and s'posing the law wor on your side to give her back to 'ee agin, an' s'posing—he stopped short and turned his white haggard face away from the Squire towards the wind-swept sea—"*her wor to veel honester left ez her wor*—what wud 'ee do then, sir? Wud 'ee fo'ce her to take shelter wi' 'ee?"

The August sun was high in the heavens and the hush of summer lay upon everything; thrush, blackbird and woodlark were all silent, waiting for mellow September to resume their song. There was a long pause. The Squire rose and came to where Mark was standing.

"My lad," he said, laying his hand on the

young fellow's arm, "you have given me a tough question, but I think you and I are of the same opinion as to the answer."

"And what be thic, sir?" Mark asked breathlessly.

"To leave her where she felt most sheltered," replied the Squire in a low voice.

A silence ensued, so beaten upon by thought that it seemed to both men the air was full of sound.

"But," exclaimed Mark at last, "you forgit, sir, that the law be on my side. You wudn't have me bide quiet and zee the law put to nought?"

The old magistrate smiled grimly. "It strikes you as strange advice coming from my lips, eh?"

"I cud give her an honest name, sir. 'Tis just thic."

"And would she take it from you?"

Mark was silent. The question seemed so simple and yet so cruel.

"I've loved her ever since her wor a snip

o' a chile," he said at last. Then, turning away, he left the house without further protest. Dazed and startled, he could neither understand himself nor the Squire. Why had he not told his tale—and yet he felt glad that he had not told it, but his heart was sore because Luce could never know how much the silence had cost him.

After a while he drew near the White Cottage once more; the soft crooning notes of a woman singing to her child floated to him through the open window. Mark flung himself down beside the hedge. Seated on a stone, between him and the house, and to all appearance fast asleep, was Constable Garge. His stolid form swayed from side to side, rocked, it might be, by its own inertia. Mark, listening to the woman's voice, paid no heed to aught else; peace, to which he had long been a stranger, stole in upon him. He stretched out his arms; it seemed to him that he was protecting Luce, fencing round her happiness with the hopes torn

from his own heart. She could never now be his, yet never had she felt more near to him.

And she, unconscious of his presence, sang to her child.

When many moments had passed, Ben Lupin, a basket of fish slung across his shoulder, came up the steep path by the cliff. At the sound of his all but noiseless tread, Constable Garge awoke, and, rising, laid his hand upon Lupin's arm and whispered something in his ear. Lupin reeled forward, then, recovering himself, the two men stood confronting each other.

"Who told 'ee that I had another wife?" he asked.

The soft crooning song floated out through the open window. Constable Garge listened uneasily. Stooping, he picked up the basket of fish that had fallen to the ground.

"Wull 'ee go in and tull Luce?" he asked, pointing towards the cottage; and Lupin went in.

There was a long silence, and Mark covered his ears with his hands and lay listening, listening. He did not know for what he listened, but, through the still air came the cry as of a woman stricken unto death.

CHAPTER XIV

When Lupin entered the cottage in search of Luce, he found her seated in a corner of the old wooden settle, the baby stretched out upon her knees. He stood for a moment looking at them, unobserved: the woman, pale from her recent illness yet with a certain indescribable charm added to her beauty; the child, small, puckered, pink, and but for the fact that it formed a necessary complement of the picture, so hideous. A broad ray of light fell, cutting them off from the rest of the world; and they, absorbed in the joy of living, recked little of any existence outside their own.

To Ben Lupin standing there, they did not seem apart, but rather as the sweet presence chamber of his well-being, outside of which his happiness could not stray. Dumbly he

struggled with the message he had to deliver; the coined speech of the world he had just quitted had no currency in this, its logic no place, its facts no correlation; only the tall clock, ticking on, joined with each sweep of the pendulum these two diverse worlds, subjecting each alike to the inexorable law of change. Raising his eyes, Lupin fixed them on the familiar white disc, where the moon, masquerading as a forlorn maiden, gazed down upon a bold and pink-faced world. There seemed to him something peculiarly cruel in the conduct of this old friend, thus refusing to stay its course, marching forward indifferent to the fact that the moments it was now called upon to measure, were not ordinary moments but precious beyond compare. The tall clock ticked on, each beat louder than the last, till Lupin glanced behind him thinking that he heard the step of Constable Garge. But the door was closed, and the burly figure of the constable remained outside. How long

though would he consent to wait? What was the measure of his patience? Lupin had lost count of time, and could not tell if hours or but a few scant moments had elapsed since he had entered the cottage.

A pressed feeling beset him, he had so much to say, so short a time to say it in. There was something almost grotesque in this sudden need for haste; hitherto Time had been his tool, now it appeared that he must play the part of tool to Time. Speech had always come easily to Lupin, but the task of shattering his own image in Luce's heart was too hard, and words failed him. He was filled with regret that he had taken such small pains at school. After all, it appeared that learning was not to be despised and might stand a man in good stead who was in sore need of help. He moved nearer, and she raised her head and smiled. A sudden darkness fell upon him, and he stumbled forward as one blind. Rising quickly, Luce caught his hand.

"Your vingers be stone cold," she exclaimed in a startled voice. "What do make 'em so cold? You be veeling bad, lad. I do be zure that you be veeling bad."

"No," he answered, "'tiddn't thic."

"Ah, but 'tis," she said. "You niver take no care of yerzulf, and half your time your clothes is wringing wet. 'Tis a wonder you haven't caught your death o' chill before this."

Impatience filled him because she failed to understand.

"You were always a slow zee-er," he answered. "Speech be more helpful to 'ee than sight."

She rubbed his hands with her soft warm fingers. "I know I be slow in the up-take."

Lupin did not reply, but sat down on the settle, resting his head against one of the rickety arms. "I wish I wor more o' a scholard," he exclaimed at last. "Wuds come easy to sich."

The expression of Luce's face grew troub-

led. "Why do 'ee need to be picking and choosing your wuds all to-wance?" she asked.

"Speech always fitted things wi' me afore," he said querulously.

"You have a tongue and a way with it," she answered, smiling. "Tull, lad, tull on."

He was silent a long time. "There be the wuds that 'ud tell 'ee, but I can't bring 'em to mind," he exclaimed, looking up at her despairingly. "They be simple wuds anuff, nought upstanding about 'em."

Laying the baby back in its cradle, Luce came and knelt in front of Lupin, taking both his hands in hers. A smile, half sad, half humorous, and wholly tender, played across her face as she looked at this strong man and spoke to him much as she would to a naughty child.

"Now what is it you've been and done, Ben?" she asked; "zome banging girt voolishness that you be moast ashamed to let on about. Jest tull me what 'tis right 'way and ha' done wi' it. You knaw wull that you be

always a deal easier in your own mind when you ha' zed things out."

Lupin had always been peculiarly sensitive to this woman's tenderness, though he resented the same quality in others; but to-day it seemed but to make the task before him more hard and bitter.

"You wudn't talk like thic if you knawed all," he said.

"Tull, lad, tull, it makes me scart to hear 'ee speak so."

He drew himself together, and the old dare-devil expression, which his face had lost of late, returned. "'Tis just that us have got to part," he exclaimed.

She made no comment, and he continued harshly, surprised that the words he had long sought seemed suddenly at hand, and hastening, lest they and his courage should fail him.

"I'll come back to 'ee when I've served my time; they can put me in prison, but they can't keep me for iver. 'Tis true anuff that

you iddn't no wife o' mine, the way the law hez it, but I niver cared for t'other woman the zame as I do for 'ee!"

She gazed dully at him, and he saw with despair that she had not understood him, and searched his mind for words to make his meaning clearer.

Stating the truth at last in all its bald, brutal simplicity and nakedness: "That woman," he said, "that tall stranger woman that comed in here the day our chile wor borned, her be my wife."

Then Luce understood, and her womanhood rent itself with one long protesting cry. Hurriedly, Lupin took her in his arms; she lay against his breast, her heart beat on his heart, and he felt the slow receding of her love from him as a great physical agony that could not be borne. He clasped her more close.

"Us be the zame ez us wor afore," he said; "the law can't wark no difference: the law can take me away from 'ee now, but it can't keep us apart for iver."

Unconsciously he raised his voice, speaking, as a man speaks to some one far off. Constable Garge, waiting without, grew impatient at the long delay, and coming to the door, knocked loudly. At the sound Lupin rose, carried Luce into the inner room, laid her on the bed, and she turned her face from him, hiding it in the pillows. He took one of her limp, nerveless hands and clasped it tight between his own.

"They be come to fetch me away. Zay zommat, Luce, afore I go," he asked beseechingly.

She did not answer him.

"Zay zommat," he repeated. "I wull come back to 'ee, and things 'ull be the zame ez they wor afore."

But still she did not reply.

He flung himself down beside her on the bed. "I must be leaving 'ee, dear heart. Don't 'ee understand that I must be leaving 'ee? They've come for me. They be gwaying to take me to gaol. When dimmet valls

and the sea comes creeping in you'll be here all by yerzulf. You'll miss your lad, Luce, zay that you'll miss your lad. I knaw I ain't acted rightful, but I niver loved t'other woman the zame ez I love 'ee. Zay zommat, Luce, zay zommat."

Coiling herself together, she shivered. He waited for an answer, but none came. Then in despair, he rose, and casting one last glance at the small shrinking form, he left her, and going out gave himself up to Constable Garge, who, for safety's sake, clapped the handcuffs on his wrists, for after all it does not do to sacrifice too much to neighbourly feeling.

So the two men walked in silence past Myrtles' cottage and "The Fisherman's Desire," and up the long, winding street. Seeing them, the villagers trooped out of their houses, flung questions, but Constable Garge, marching very upright, answered never a word; and Lupin listening for Luce's voice, for the sound of her hurry-

ing steps, was deaf to all else. The street ceased, and was replaced by a lane, winding between high hedges to the market town. Lupin glanced behind, but the road lay as bare as the walls of the cell in which he was locked later. But it was there, when night fell, that the Luce he had waited for came to him. He had fallen asleep and he saw her in his dreams: she strove with all her strength to raise the weight that lay as a stone upon his heart, but for that she had not the power. When he awoke she was there no longer. Neither was she present at his trial, when he was tried for bigamy, found guilty, and sentenced to be imprisoned for five years. Yet ever with his dreams she would return and strive to roll away the stone from his heart, till at last, the years passing on, the stone sank into his heart and became, as it were, the heart itself; then she ceased to visit him, for what good lay in such coming.

CHAPTER XV

The feeling of the villagers, on learning the reason of Ben Lupin's arrest, was one of genuine pity for the girl he had betrayed, mixed with a strong sense of what was due to themselves as neighbours; for, if Luce had been deceived, it was certain that the people of Bere-Upton had been no less so. Indeed, when they came to talk the matter over quietly, they were inclined to think that the deception practised on them had been more gross.

It was perhaps this, taken with the fact that the real culprit was safely locked out of the way in gaol, that served more than anything to curb in their sympathy, and led by short and easy stages to their considering Luce, if not the chief delinquent, at least as willing accomplice after the

act. They did not, however, include the girl's parents in their condemnation. Indeed, Mrs. Myrtle was an object of general sympathy, coming as she did from good stock, and meeting her trouble in so genteel a fashion that one of the villagers observed: "It was a lesson in good manners only to see her."

The impression was perhaps the more marked because Luce's mother, while extracting the subtle essence from the sympathy extended to her, made it apparent that the occasion was not one for condolence, nor would condolence be accepted. Indeed, it would have taken a person of sturdy faith in the stoutness of their own legs to venture forth on such an errand, and only one was known to have attempted it, and she was a chapelite, and kept a fine stock of spiritual pride as a salve for sore limbs.

Mrs. Myrtle's temporal blend, however, proved more than a match for the latter in

the combat that ensued. She had received her visitor in the silk dress reserved for Sundays and festivals. The bodice, cut long in front, and insufficiently stiffened, had a trick of doubling back upon its wearer whenever she assumed a sitting attitude, obliging her husband, John Myrtle, who, if slow was sure, to lean forward and press it into place with a click. Thus gowned, Luce's mother produced such an impression on her visitor that the latter contracted a distaste for whalebone and silks as productive of an unnatural "up-lift" to pride when found in combination.

Good birth—like murder—will out, and nothing at this point could afford a more striking contrast than the behaviour of John Myrtle and his wife; but then, all the world knew that he had been a work-'us lad with no parents to speak of. There was an unrestrained sincerity about his grief that made it, to the critical taste of the village, almost vulgar.

He sat by the kitchen sink, unwashed, yet

within reach of water, his great, hairy chest exposed, and shaken by tearless sobs. "'Twor a throw-back to his mother," the villagers said, who, to her shame, had been deceived and cast upon the streets.

The White Cottage stood alone, but some little distance away was a small, slate-roofed house, from the upper windows of which a view of the cottage could be obtained. Here it was that those villagers who had nothing better to do betook themselves, being desirous of noting the number of Luce's visitors. This required but little arithmetical skill, for, though the door of the White Cottage stood wide open, no one went either in or out.

After some time, however, Septimus Spong came slowly down the lane, bearing on his arm a basket of kidney beans which he intended to present to Luce. At once a number of curious eyes were turned in his direction, and one of the villagers went so far as to call out and ask him where he was going. Spong seemed to find this sudden interest in

his movements embarrassing; he slackened pace, then, stopping short, stared shamefacedly at the open door of the White Cottage. His hesitation only served to increase the interest of the onlookers, and the villager who had previously addressed him, came out on purpose to inquire the reason of his indecision. The man's curiosity was not gratified, Spong turning the tables on the questioner by asking, "Why, if he wor so anxious, he didn't go in hiszulf?"

At this moment the rector was seen approaching. The Rev. Benjamin Baugh was an old man, whose one remedy for the ills that overtook his parishioners was the gift of a bottle of port wine and half a crown, and if, as it now and again chanced, the cure scarce fitted the complaint, he was sore put to it to find a better remedy. Happily, however, matters seldom came to so sore a pass, and though the villagers as a whole were for moving with the times, few of them were advanced enough to find the rector's gift unac-

ceptable. Spong at once opened the garden gate for the rector to walk through, and then moved, as he explained later, by "kooriosity," he followed him into the cottage. Luce stood by the window, staring over the sea. She paid no attention to her visitors' entrance, but Widow Flutter, who was nursing the baby, rose and curtseyed.

The rector waved her back into her seat, and, drawing forward a chair, sat down in front of her. Among Luce's few friends no one, perhaps, was more genuinely sorry for her than the Rev. Benjamin Baugh, but his sympathy, as with that of so many of us, got sadly skimped in the expressing. "Fe, fa, fo, fum," he ejaculated slowly, and raising a red and muscular fore finger, he poked the baby hard in the ribs between each word. There was a brief pause while the child's crimson face grew purple with astonishment and pain, then it burst into a yell of execration. The rector, whose finger was already poised for a second series of pokes, drew back

his chair, not a little disconcerted at the return his playful sally had met with; but Widow Flutter restored him to equanimity by observing that the child cried, "Because it felt itzulf zo honoured."

Awakening from her dream, Luce came forward and took the baby herself, and as she stood there looking down with her sad, serious eyes at the rector, a sudden uneasiness seemed to fall on the Rev. Benjamin Baugh. Rising hastily, he bade her good-day, and shuffled off. Neither did Spong linger, but when the villagers, tired of watching, had returned to their homes, he came again and dug up a patch of ground that Lupin had left half-tilled. It was here, later in the evening, that John Myrtle found him, and the two fraternised in silence. From time to time the little postman would stop working, push his hat further back on his head and wipe the sweat from his face with his sleeve, and at such moments John Myrtle, half rising from the barrow where

he was seated, never failed to spit on his hands as if he were just about to lay hold of the vacated spade, only to relapse once more back into idleness. After a while he left Spong and entered the cottage. Widow Flutter, having put things in order, had gone home; the child slept, lulled by the sea, which was in no mood to make a display. John Myrtle found a chair close to the cradle and sat down. A curious sensation came to him. It was much as if the child that lay there sleeping so unconcernedly were himself—for he too had been a child of shame: a like indifference had filled him in those far-off days; he supped in life and waxed strong, knowing only that the breast that fed him was sweet, and not that it covered an aching heart. Thinking of it, pitying tears for the mother long since dead darkened his eyes; he half longed that she might live again so that he might give her now that which he had owed her then. The dusk of a long summer evening deep-

ened into night, and Luce came from the inner room, and, sinking down beside her father, laid her head upon his knee. There, in the dim twilight, he became part bearer of her sorrow, suffering, and shame. He was not a clever man, John Myrtle, and the few times his mind had been set stirring it had been by emotion, not thought; but deep within, and unknown to himself, the mother he had long held dead still lived, enabling him to understand his daughter's grief.

Meanwhile, in the cottage facing "The Fisherman's Desire," Mrs. Myrtle sat alone. Luce was not hurt at her absence, she neither missed nor needed her. There had been affection but little sympathy between mother and daughter, and trouble served rather to separate than draw them together. Yet Mrs. Myrtle's heart was heavy enough, and her eyes smarted with the unshed tears that had burned behind the lids all day.

The neighbours, their curiosity satisfied, had gone home, and when the last woman's

back was turned, Mrs. Myrtle had taken off her black silk dress and laid it on one side with a fierce snort of pride and an unconscious sigh of relief. Then she did the few little household matters that wanted to be done, brushed up the hearth and sat down. A clean hearth was necessary to Mrs. Myrtle's peace of mind as a clear conscience, and this night her conscience was ill at ease. The lamp remained unlit, and in the long summer dusk the old woman slowly conned through the pages of her past life. It seemed, after all, that she had done wrong wedding John Myrtle. Other men had wished to marry her — there was Peter Adams, a yeoman farmer who had stopped in his yellow gig at her father's house every Tuesday and Saturday on his way back from market, and left her a cream cheese and a bunch of red damask roses—he had married later when he learned that his suit was hopeless—well, his children had gone up in the world. Why had she married

John Myrtle? The question had often puzzled her, and to-night it puzzled her again. She had never held him to be her equal, had treated him, too, with a certain severity which had increased as the years drew on and he showed no signs of jibbing under the yoke. Bending down she stirred the fire, and, doing so, a knock sounded at the door and Mark Tavy entered. The flames shot up and showed him, clean, neat, almost spruce.

It had been a hard day for the old woman, she had borne her troubles bravely, complaining to no one, not even to herself, but now, as she looked across at the young fisherman, and noted his well-brushed clothes and shiny boots, the thought struck her that he at least might have stayed away, or if he must come, appear less prosperous.

Mark, unconscious of the feeling he had raised, drew closer and stood, hat in hand, fingering the felt with long nervous fingers.

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Myrtle sharply, "what is it?"

Mark tried to speak and his voice choked back in his throat. He coughed and then burst out uneven and rough.

"Do you reckon?" he said," "that Luce 'll have me now?"

The question, so unexpected, struck the old woman dumb; but, after a while, though words would not come to her, the tears that had burned so long behind the tired, red lids began to fall.

Mark put out his hand and touched the back of her chair.

"Mother," he repeated, "do you reckon that Luce 'ull have me now? I wud make her a good husband."

Bending forward, the proud old woman pressed her thin, withered lips to his hand. "My heart has been sore all day, lad," she answered.

"I'll be a good son to 'ee."

"Aye, you are a good lad."

Then he turned and went out.

CHAPTER XVI

Some have found that to love was to enter again as a stranger into their own hearts, and many of those that hate have made a like journey. It might be that Luce was such a one, for though she was slow to realize all that had befallen her, and the truth took long to fit into the crevices of her heart and brain, yet, as bit by bit it forced a way in, pushing out before it all that hitherto she had held dear, a strong new self, bitter of thought and tongue, rose up and confronted her. It almost seemed as if the power to forgive was not hers, and her heart hardened under the lack of it; she felt that Lupin had done a deed for which there was no forgiveness, and that she was not called upon to forgive; and yet there were moments when she was seized with terror, lest in spite

of all she might forgive him. Her thoughts dwelt on him continually—only not with love but bitterness. Sleep deserted her, and when night fell she roved from room to room of the White Cottage, and the child, waking, wailed after her. Sometimes she hated the child, and let it cry on unheeded, then again she would snatch it up in her arms, and press it against her heart as if the touch of its tiny hand could take away her over-burdening shame. One evening as she sat alone, no sound breaking the stillness but the see-sawing of the waves on the rocks below, Mark came to her. He looked nervous and ill at ease; self, partly scotched, had left him startled at its grossness, his victory over it had so near ended in a defeat, the thought that his hands had all but helped to draw tight the cords of shame round Luce, left him shuddering. Still, threads of elation ran through the woof of his feelings, though he himself was scarce conscious of their existence; but to Luce they were glar-

ingly visible, jarring on her as some hideous colour till the fabric of the man became a thing of distaste to her.

Mark drew nearer, and sat down astride a chair, pushing his head sheepishly forward, and resting his chin on the back of the seat. The sense of separation that always haunted him when face to face with this woman returned, his heart ached dully; it seemed doubly hard that the moment having at last come when she needed his help he should feel so. Sitting there, with a bitter, disdainful expression on her face, she did not look one who would lightly ask for or accept help. Raising his eyes, he scanned her face, half-analysing, but failing to understand its expression. He saw no reason why his presence should be distasteful to her, therefore did not believe in its being so; her eyes, for all their bitterness, were fuller of sorrow, and he longed to comfort her, but did not know how to begin; she had never been com-

forted by that which he had found comforting. Again, he felt strangely shy at the presence of the child; it lay in the cradle at her feet, and he asked himself again and again why she cared to have it where any stranger dropping in might see it. There seemed to him something unwomanly in this indifference on her part. He was proud to be the man who should draw the garment of respectability once more about her, still he would have been better pleased to have found her shivering for the lack of it.

By some subtle instinct, Luce divined his feelings, and the knowledge awoke her to one of her rare fits of tenderness for the child. Stooping, she picked the baby up, pressing it to her breast, kissing its eyes and lips, the soft creases in its tiny, fat neck and mottled arms.

Mark turned aside, trying not to watch her, but she thrust the child forward, calling on him to note for himself how fine a baby

it was. He pushed the child gently aside and sat tugging at his blonde beard—he did not wish to hurt Luce, yet his manner towards her chilled.

The girl watched him closely, her lips parted in a smile, which served rather to embitter than soften her face.

"Why, you haven't a word to throw at 'un and he that fine limbed," she exclaimed.

"Put the chile back in the cradle, I've zommat to say to 'ee," he answered abruptly.

She burst into a little rough laugh. "No," she said; "he'll bide the happier 'long o' his mother."

"Ez you wull," replied the young fisherman, rising from his seat and going to the window. He felt he could not unburden himself of his errand, while she flaunted the child in his face; but she got up and followed him, bearing the child with her.

He had often been hurt by this woman, but there had been some quality in the love he bore her, which had made him forgive

even while she yet wounded him; now, however, a new feeling awoke in his heart, a feeling he tried to stifle down lest the hour of her need having come, he should turn from her. Glancing round the kitchen, his eye lingered on the shabby furniture, and the evidence of her poverty stirred the pity in his heart anew.

"I always hoped us wud live here together zome day," he exclaimed at last.

Dully, the red began to burn in her pale cheeks. Mark avoided looking into her face, and, fixing his eyes on the battered wooden settle, continued hurriedly, not choosing his words, but catching at the first that came to hand.

"Luce," he exclaimed, "won't 'ee let me make things right for 'ee avore the vullage?"

"What do 'ee mean?" she asked in a thick voice.

"To gi'e 'ee an honest name. I be jest tur rible willun' to marry 'ee."

The slow-gathering indignation burst in a sudden flame of red across her face.

"What be there in any name o' yours that shud make a woman honest for the having it?" she exclaimed passionately.

"'Tis a name that has always been respected in the village, which is what Ben Lupin can't say for his," he answered, more wounded than he cared to allow, even to himself.

She drew back as from a blow. The mere mention of Lupin seemed to part afresh the festering wounds he had made in her life. "Git you gone," she said, pointing towards the open door.

But Mark did not stir. This meeting with Luce, so different from all he had foreshadowed, had proved yet another foil between him and his hopes. He could not understand why he had failed, or reconcile himself to failure.

"What have I done that you shud treat me the like o' this?" he asked bitterly.

She made no reply, but laying the baby

back in the cradle, went to the inner room and shut the door upon him and the child.

Mark looked at the closed door, which seemed a symbol of all that barred him out from the heart of this woman. The child, frightened at being left, fell to wailing.

"Surely," Mark thought, "she will come back to comfort it."

But she did not return and the child wailed on.

"Does she love the child?" he asked himself—and still she did not return. Slowly the wish formed in his heart that she would not come, that she would leave the child as bare of comfort as she had left him; he could afford to starve if Lupin's son must bear him company, yet he tried to stave back his hunger by the belief that she did still love him, and make plausible an explanation that should fit in with this belief. A new idea presented itself. What if she imagined that it was he who had denounced Lupin? His heart gave a great throb of relief—at least, then,

he was to experience the reward of self-sacrifice. The sacrifice had not been sweet in the making, but it might yet earn for him the respect and affection of the one woman he loved. He bowed his face upon his hands, and thanked God who had given him strength to do the finer thing, then he raised his eyes and looked across the sea. A gracious world this, that he lived in, and he felt in accord with it. Rising, he stole toward the bedroom door, pulling up short as a step became audible on the path without, and the trim figure of Mrs. Myrtle passed the window. At the sight all desire to linger left him, and, opening the back door, and jumping the wall, he flung himself down on the green turf beside the edge of the cliff to con over and over a thousand possible eventualities.

Mrs. Myrtle meanwhile had entered the cottage. The baby had ceased crying, and dropped off to sleep. She looked at it for a moment, frowning heavily, not staying, however, to waste a second glance on the

small, puckered, tear-stained face, but going straight to the bedroom opened the door and went in. It was the first meeting of mother and daughter since Lupin's arrest. Luce, who was seated on a broken-backed wooden chair, raised her head and stared almost sullenly at the sharp-eyed old woman; she had never loved her mother, and to-day her presence was unwelcome. It was of scant account to Mrs. Myrtle whether she was welcome, her susceptibilities were not worn to a thin edge, and in no case would she have troubled over so trivial a detail; but this evening her mind was filled with more weighty matter. Wasting no time, she went straight to the point.

"Mark Tavy's been here?"

"Ess."

"I saw un go in. Then he's willun to make an honest woman o' 'ee?"

Luce cast a bitter, indignant look upon her mother, but made no reply.

"What," exclaimed the old woman sharp-

ly, "you don't mean to tell me he's been and gone back on his word!"

For answer the girl broke into a wild laugh. "Be you so mortal anxious to make an honest woman o' me?"

"Ain't I your mother? What makes 'ee ax such things?"

"I shudn't veel no honester married to the like o' he."

"That iddn't the question. Did he ax 'ee is what I want to know?"

"Ess, and I showed un the door."

"The door!"

"Ess."

There was a moment's silence while the old woman fitted the meaning to the words.

"Be you off your chump or daft, or jest bone-wicked?" she exclaimed, coming forward and seizing her daughter's arm. "Is your fether's good name and mine o' no vally to 'ee? Don't you take no count o' 'pinion o' the vullage?"

"Didn't I tull 'ee I shud veel jest ez re-

spectable left ez I be?" Luce answered in a sullen voice.

"And what do your veelings matter, I shud like to know."

"I shall valler 'em, thic be all."

"You'll no marry un?"

"No, I'll no marry un."

"And why for no?"

"Because he wud niver be no husband o' mine if I wor married to un a score o' times over."

"Oh, you're bone-wicked, that's what you are."

"May be."

"Do you reckon to wait till Ben Lupin comes out o' gaol and go and live 'long o' he?"

The girl's teeth clenched on her white lips, but she made no reply.

"Be that what you're after?"

"I shan't tell 'ee."

"You wud rather wait for he than marry an honest respectable lad?"

"I shan't tull 'ee naught whatsoiver."

Anger, vexation, surprise held Mrs. Myrtle silent a moment, then the bitterness of her disappointment burst in a torrent of words.

"I cudn't have believed that a chile o' mine cud have so little notion o' the vally o' respect. Whose blood be in 'ee that you shud act so outrageous, that's what I ax? I know well enough whose 'tis, though. Oh, 'twas an evil day when I set eyes on your fether, for all that he's so well meaning and fine limbed. A woman can answer for herself afore the Lord and afore the parish, but the best o' 'em can't tull who her childer wull take after. 'Tis a lop twisted thing this mixing o' natures in marriage. But there," she ended, with a sudden change of voice, "What's the use o' wasting words. You'll be fo'ced to marry un, that's the long and short of it. Tiddn't often that a maid left ez you be gits such a chance. Most women wud catch to a rag wi' a name to it—let

alone a decent young chap who had fifty pound put by in the savings bank and a boat and nets."

Luce rose and went slowly into the next room, her head bent and her hands listless. She was very tired, but her mind was made up and the jar and worry of words would not change it.

The old woman looked after her, half guessing that she was powerless to alter her daughter's decision.

"Her's heavy blooded the same ez her fether," she exclaimed, "when once her's falled into a thing 'twud take more'n patience to move her."

Lifting the tea-pot from the dresser, Luce turned to her mother. "I'm going to make myself a drop o' tea. Will you take a cup?"

The girl's apathy, though she expected nothing else, did not fail to jar on Mrs. Myrtle's nerves.

"I'll take no bite nor sup in this house till I see you made into an honest woman,"

she answered, and so saying she walked out of the cottage, slamming the door after her.

Mark was waiting on the cliffs without, and when the old woman had departed and the echo of her footsteps had died away, he returned and knocked at the door. There was no answer, and the thought came to him that he would not knock again, but wait till morning, when Luce would open the door unto the world and he would enter with the fresh breezes of the dawn.

All through the long, warm summer night he lay out upon the cliffs, and looked up at the stars and at a small wisp of moon scudding among the clouds. Near by stood the White Cottage, and he thought of the closed door and the sleeping woman within, and it seemed to him that with the opening of the door of the cottage she would open the door of her heart also. He grew humble, knowing at last how great a thing he demanded of this woman—his own love seemed

a poor rag to wrap round her, yet he felt it might serve to keep out the harsher winds; but most of all, as he lay there, he was thankful that it was not he who had denounced Lupin. Peace stole round him as a warm garment and at last he slept.

With the first stirrings of the morn he rose and came to the White Cottage door. After long waiting, she opened to him, and seeing him standing there her face grew heavy with anger. The dew was in his eyes and hair, and believing that he had but to speak for her anger to leave her, he laughed out fresh and strong from sheer strength of manhood.

She started at the sound and drew back.

"Luce," he said eagerly, "'tworn't me told on Lupin. I knawed it all along, but I jest kept zilent."

For a moment the girl looked at him as if she failed to grasp the meaning of his words.

"When Ben doed it, what be it to me

who told on 'un," she answered, and, going in, slammed back the door.

Leaving the White Cottage Mark went his way. There was no reward, then, for self-sacrifice.

CHAPTER XVII

It was winter; four months had passed since Lupin's arrest. The gulls, driven before the December wind, flew screaming past the White Cottage. Night drew on; the wind, howling itself into a fury of sound, rushed in upon the rain-bedraggled land. The little cottage cowered under the thatched roof, while far below the sea eat away upwards through the base of the cliff. All day the road across the hills had been bare of traffic, but at the closing in of the evening a solitary woman hurried along it, seeking shelter from the bare hedges and getting but scant measure. She halted at last opposite the White Cottage, leaning on the gate, which had sunk into the sodden earth sagged outwards, neither open nor shut. For a long time she stood there, gazing across at

the windows. A streak of firelight struck through the garden almost to her feet, making her tall, black figure look the taller and the blacker for the contrast. She shivered; then drawing herself upright, walked forward and knocked at the door. Luce opened it, and for a moment the two women stood looking at one another as if each were gathering her strength under her for combat. At last Hester Lupin broke the silence.

"I've come," she said, "to die in my husband's house."

Again silence fell upon the two.

"He lays no claim to 'ee," Luce answered.

A shiver tore through Hester; she leant against the doorpost. "I be dying," she exclaimed brokenly; "I shall soon be forced to leave 'un for good and all, and I feel nearer to 'un here than in the cottage where he turned his back on me."

Luce laughed harshly. "If you can find comfort in sich things ez thic, come in and welcome," she answered, standing aside.

Hester entered, pride straightening and giving fresh energy to her weary body. She walked across the room to where Lupin's chair stood. It had been pushed back against the wall, a small chest thrust in front, and looked as if scant use were made of it.

"Thickey here be his'n?" she said.

Luce nodded, and Hester Lupin drew the chair forward and sat down near the fire. Fever made brilliant her dark eyes and flamed in the worn, thin face, eating into her as fire and ice, so that she shivered even as she was consumed.

Colder and colder grew the night, and the two women cowering over the fire were forced to draw closer together, yet each looked upon the other as an intruder. Neither spoke, but their hearts fought for the possession of the same man; while from without the storm slashed in upon their combat, ripping open the silence with a fine cut and thrust.

At last Luce rose, and going into the adjoining room, returned after a moment bearing the sleeping child in her arms. A feeling of despair fell upon Hester at the sight of the child, and she knew she was being triumphed over.

The baby awoke and clamoured, pressing *ten* pink fingers deep into the bosom that fed it, and Hester, watching, felt the pain of that pressure in her own breast. It seemed to her that the pride on which she had fed through the long night ran dry, leaving her spirit bare of sustenance. Slowly the tears gathered in her eyes and fell upon her face, and she made no stir to hide her grief, but wept stark out. Need of relief grew in her; she found words and spoke, laying bare her sorrow before Luce.

"I went to 'un over to there," she began in a low, hoarse voice. "They allows you in certain days. 'Tis a banging girt building, Exetur prison; a mortal lot o' bricks went to the making o' it. A having place if you

were to die there, your spirut wud niver git out, you be that barred and locked back from the free air. I said to mezulf when I cast eyes on it, 'tis contrary folks are to put my Ben away in sich, he who wor always for an open door. They had got passages there wi' an echo to 'em that vallers you step by step ez you walk, and sort o' says, 'You can't git out; do what 'ee will, you can't git out.' Ben must ha' heard it a-saying thic scores o' times, and terrible angered he's been no doubt. They'll have to do zommat; he'll no bide long o' that, he niver could bear being faced. Then the tidiness o' it all 'ull tarn his stomach; he dearly liked to have his things lie about, and for all that he wor zo fond o' hacking and chipping, I had to hunt round for his knife ez many times ez he laid it down. Poor lad, he's got no wan to worrit round arter 'un now, though, from what I saw o' the place, 'tis a deal too tidy for aught to go astray in it!"

She stopped speaking, and Luce turned

away to hide her face; but Hester paid no heed to her, and after a moment went on with her tale.

"They makes 'ee write your name in a book, so I wrote 'un down. 'Hester Lupin' I wrote; but I wor narvous, and the man cudn't make nought o' the writing. He axed me to read it, and I read it. 'Wife o' 'un?' he says, and I says, 'Ess, wife o' 'un.' Wi' that he went out and left me, and I tried to git my scattered senses together, for Ben niver cud bide loose-fitting talk. But the only wuds that drummed droo my head wor, 'wife o' 'un, wife o' 'un!' Zometimes they would zound turrible loud, the zame ez if every mortal stone in Exetur gaol had taken tongue to hiszulf, and then again they wud jest clitter-tippy-toe; but w'ether they wor loud or w'ether they wor zaft, I wor forced to listen to 'em. Arter a bit, the man comed along back. 'I've told 'un you be here,' he said. 'Did he say ought?' I axed. 'He said, "Be her mortal personable?" And I

told 'un you had zarrer stamped across your vace,' the man answered. 'What did he say to thic?' I axed. 'Jest nought. He fell all of a-trembly; that's what he did.' 'I never knawed 'un do that afore,' I answered. 'Ah,' said the man, 'gaol 'ull bring things out that nought ulse will.' Wi' that he told me to valler 'un, and I vallered 'un. When us got to the door o' the cell, there wor a lil' pane o' glass in it, no bigger than your hand. 'Look in,' he says, 'and you'll zee 'un.' But I couldn't bring mezulf to spy on Ben. The man undid the door, and us went in."

Again she fell silent, and Luce, who had craned her head forward, listening to the story, drew back suddenly.

The fear that she should forgive him and be left defenceless against his pleadings, swept down upon her with renewed force. "If I shud forgi'e 'un," she muttered; "if I shud forgi'e 'un!"

After some moments Hester Lupin continued, her voice sinking almost to a whisper.

"He wor standing wi' his back tarned to us," she said. "High up over his head wor a lil' snip o' a winder; there wor nought to be zeen out o' it, less maybe a patch o' sky. The man he bided at the door, and I went vorrid to Ben. He didn't tarn, Ben didn't, but just stood sort o' listening. He wor all o' a-trembly, and thet made me fear'd, beca'se I had niver zeen 'un the like o' that afore. I put out my hand to touch 'un, and then I drapped it down agin my side; thickey words, 'Wife o' 'un,' 'wife o' 'un,' sang droo my head, giving me no rast.

"'Luce,' he said. I didn't make 'un no answer, for my heart thrust itzulf in atween me and speech.

"'You've been long a-coming,' he said. And still I didn't make 'un no answer.

"'I've wearied a-bit waiting for 'ee,' he said. I cudn't fine wuds—I jest cudn't.

"'I shud niver break my heart for no woman living, they bain't worth it,' he said,

sort o' proudful. Then he stopped quat, and all the spirut went out o' 'un, and he fell to crying the zame ez a chile.

"'You've bin long a-coming,' he said. 'I niver reckoned on 'ee biding away like thic.' I cudn't find wuds, for 'twor you he hungered arter."

She ceased speaking, and the wind roaring in the chimney made a noise like a gigantic humming-top, a-spin on a plain of steel; the door and windows shook and rattled; but rising clear of all other sounds was the ceaseless clamour of the sea. Mechanically Luce rose and stirred the fire; she did not know what she was doing; it seemed to her that something in her brain was being drawn to full stretch, and each nerve was alert for the moment of the breaking. A sob—low, scarce audible—thrust its way through Hester Lupin's lips; it sounded like a smothered cry torn off short in the throat. Luce made no motion to comfort her, neither did Hester seek comfort. Each had ceased to think on

the other's presence, or to be conscious of aught but her own grief.

"I cudn't finds wuds," Hester repeated. "I cudn't find wuds. How cud I vind wuds when 'tworn't me that he hungered after. He tarned his starved face on me, and I looked back to 'un, but cudn't vind wuds. He worn't angered the zame ez he wud ha' been wance, he wor jest starved wi' waiting. He didn't zay nought, but sort o' told me wi' his eyes that I cudn't be no help to 'un, zo arter a bit I tarned and went."

She fell into a silence as bare as the tale she told, while without the wind and sea pursued their conflict unrestrained.

The keener cold of dawn shivered through the room, the fire sank together and went out, the two women sought shelter side by side in the old wooden bed. Hester slept; fever burning strange pictures on her brain, dimmed in moments of semi-consciousness, distorted, vivid, grotesque, as sleep laid hold of her once more; but Luce lay stiff and still,

her wide-open eyes staring into the darkness. Word by word she went back over Hester Lupin's story, peeling it down to the very roots.

"I dursn't forgi'e 'ee, Ben," she muttered; "I dursn't, I dursn't."

When dawn crept between the closed shutters she turned from the thought of Lupin to think upon herself, and there in the dimly lighted room she became conscious of the change that was being wrought in her, realizing that in stemming back forgiveness her nature was hardening, but she welcomed the change, for it seemed a fresh barrier between herself and Ben. In thought she gathered herself together for the blow she would one day deliver to a soul as sore wounded as her own, and all the while the quick pain-drawn breathing of Hester Lupin thrust itself noisily upon her meditations, as if it would remind her that close at hand lay a soul wounded unto death.

Luce turned and looked at Hester in the

gathering light. The thin, sorrow-stamped face, the grey hair, the feverish, twitching hands, awoke in her neither compassion nor hate. Strangely enough she did not hate Lupin's wife, regarding her rather with a vast indifference. She knew the woman was dying, and from grief; the knowledge made her shudder at her own strength. She glanced down at her plump hands and arms thinking that grief had made poor way with its task so far as she was concerned. A laugh forced her clenched teeth apart; after all what did it matter whether she lived or died? Sorrow had hardened her against its own onslaught. The tall clock in the kitchen struck the hour; hearing it she got up, huddled on her clothes with careless haste and lit the fire. She then made some tea and cutting off a hunch of bread eat it dry with hungry relish, the long, sleepless night behind her having left the edge of her appetite unimpaired.

Hester did not stir, but twice as the day

advanced she dragged herself to the small courtyard where the pump stood and drank feverishly of the ice-cold water. Luce raised no voice to restrain her, though the sight irked her womanly instincts. It was Hester Lupin's affair; she had forced herself into the White Cottage to die, and she might have the ordering of her own dying.

Night came round, again the two women lay side by side in the old wooden bed. This time it was Luce who slept. Awakening later she saw Hester Lupin standing beside the cradle. The child was in her arms, its lips pressed up against her bare bosom, while her long grey hair curled over the small, puckered face and about her shoulders. The window stood wide open, the bleak air blowing full on them. Did Hester mean to kill the child? For a moment Luce lay and watched her, then springing out of her bed almost tore the baby from Hester Lupin's arms.

"What wud 'ee do wi' 'un?" she asked,

surprised at her own vehemence of emotion. "You can kill yourzulf and welcome, but the chile's mine and——" She stopped short, something freezing back the coming words. Going to the cradle she was about to lay the baby back, when a glance at Hester's face told her she had to do with a woman no longer responsible for her actions.

"Git back to bed, do," she said in a quieter voice. "The fever's on 'ee and 'tis bad work playing with sich."

But Hester did not stir, and stood looking at the child as if she were about to snatch it back from Luce. "Give me the little lad," she exclaimed, holding out her arms.

"You are not in a fit state to be trusted wi' un."

"He be my own child, and safer wi' me than wi' stranger folk, though they be so mortal anxious to steal 'un away."

Luce walked to the bed and turned back the clothes. "Come," she said sooth-

ingly, "and git in between the blankets: you'll catch your death o' cold standing there."

For a moment Hester Lupin stood, her dark brilliant eyes fixed on Luce. "You reckon I be sick," she answered, "and not fit to be trusted wi' my own chile; but he's all I have now Ben's took from me."

Luce turned away, a feeling of pity stirred in her heart for the first time since sorrow had hardened it. "Git into bed," she said huskily, "me and the chile 'ull lay down aside 'ee."

Hester did as she was bid.

For a short time the nearness of the child seemed to sooth her, and she lay with her hand touching the baby's shawl; but after a while she sat up suddenly and began speaking in an excited voice.

"'Tiddn't no manner o' use axing me to be quiet, I know what 'twill be; zo zoon ez I drap off to slape, you'll slip away wi' the chile and I shall niver set eyes on 'un agin.

But I'll not be zo voolish. Ben, he'll think the world of me now I've got a little lad. He always said that a chile wor a draw home to folks the like o' hiszulf. A wild, unreasonable man Ben in zome things, but terrible took up wi' childer. Us wor man and wife five years afore this wan comed to us, and many's the time Ben's been fo'ced to sit azide a lonesome hearth a-waiting for his coming. Ess, and my heart has ached wishing for 'un too. Spring and fruiting time wor always bitter to me, for it zim'd to come home more than iver then what 'twor to be childless; and Ben he felt the zame, for 'twas spring when he left me, a barren woman, sitting aside a bare hearth."

She stopped speaking and stretched out her feverish hand towards the child. "Let 'un be here in my arms, I shall feel easier wi' 'un zo. I've hungered arter 'un five long years, and now he's come I can't bear 'un out o' my zight."

Luce changed the child to the other arm

so as to bring it closer to the sick woman. It seemed strange to her that she should lie there and listen to Hester Lupin's ravings and that she should not hate but humour her. Was her love less dead than she fancied? And would she end by pitying and trying to save the life of a woman whose existence cast the blight of shame upon her own? She could not believe it, and yet, as she looked at Hester, who had fallen into a troubled sleep, the thought came that the doctor ought to be fetched without delay.

She rose and went to the kitchen, carrying the child with her. Why should she trouble to fetch the doctor? Let Hester die. She began to busy herself tidying the room, washing and putting away the breakfast things. Suddenly, however, she laid aside the work in hand and going to the door looked out. The wind had dropped and the ground was black with frost. Across the hills the road wound, bare of traffic. She

threw a shawl round her head, and running to the garden gate glanced down the lane. There was no one in sight. The cold was piercing; she might stand a couple of hours and not cast eyes upon a living soul. Something must be done and that quickly. Returning to the cottage she peeped through the bedroom window at Hester. The bedclothes had been thrown partly back, but seeing that the sick woman still slept, Luce determined to fetch the doctor herself. She cast one glance at the White Cottage as she hurried away. A strange sense of foreboding possessed her, then she burst into a laugh of derision, knowing well that all she had cared for on earth had perished with her own honour.

She took scant time over her errand, a bare twenty minutes by the clock, but when she returned, Hester had gone and the child also. For a moment Luce stood beside the empty cradle, and the gates that had so long stemmed back her love from her child shook

as if about to be forced apart. Her eyes fell on the soft warm shawl in which the baby had been wrapped, and at the sight of it the winter cold bit through her.

The doctor entered.

"Her's gone and taken the chile," she said; and not waiting for a reply went out.

She did not know in which direction to seek, and let her eyes rove along the frozen ground, as if she expected to see the print of Hester's bare feet. A flock of starlings, closely packed, flew past, scavenging for food; but nothing else stirred; all nature seemed shrunk within ill-fitting garments.

The doctor joined her.

"I will put some men on to search. This is a matter of life and death."

Luce made no reply, but listened to him hurrying away on his errand, her eyes still fixed on the frozen ground. She could think of nothing but the terrible cold and the child as being forced to meet it bare, except for his little flannel gown. All day and for

many days after parties of men were out on a vain search. Then one evening Luce packed a small bundle of things together, locked the door of the White Cottage and went herself to find her child. At the nearest town she spent the few shillings she had on thread, needles, buttons, that she might resell the same again, and earn sufficient to support her on her quest.

CHAPTER XVIII

Four summers passed away and the villagers ceased to trouble themselves over Lupin's affairs, agreeing that the place was well quit of him and that the gaol had come into its own.

It was once more August and evening. The curlew that had flown inland to breed were hurrying seaward, followed by their young. Luce had not returned and the White Cottage stood vacant. At the close of each day's work, Mark lit the fire in the small, shabbily furnished kitchen and put the kettle on to boil, as if he expected Luce to return that night. Sometimes he climbed to the top of the hill, and looked away across the valleys, thinking that he might see her on one of the long, winding roads. This August evening he did see her. She was

carrying a small bundle, and walked wearily. Hastening forward he relieved her of her load and they returned together along the same track that he had come. Neither spoke. When the White Cottage rose in sight Luce stopped involuntarily; tears filled her eyes and fell upon her face. Mark would have comforted her, but he had no words, so they trudged on once more in silence. Drawing nearer she saw that smoke rose from the chimney and the door of the cottage stood open. She glanced questioningly at Mark.

"I reckoned maybe you wud come back along home to-night," he explained.

Her face fell. "What did make 'ee think I wud come to-night o' all nights?" she asked, after a pause, surprise fighting with disappointment in her voice.

He turned away his head. "I didn't reckon speshil on 'ee coming to-night."

"Have 'ee been and lit the fire afore to-night?"

"Ess."

"Many times afore?"

"Ess, most nights."

"Why it be nigh on four years agone that I wor here!"

"I reckoned you might drop in any time."

Luce sighed wearily. "I've been far," she said. "I shall be glad to bide still and rest."

Pushing open the wicket gate she crossed the garden and sank down on the small seat under the porch.

For a moment, Mark watched her, undecided whether to follow or not; then, with sudden determination, he turned and went away.

His absence passed unnoticed by Luce, whose mind was filled with other thoughts. She had found no trace in her wanderings of either Hester or the child, and now, as she sat looking in through the half-open door, the empty cottage seemed like a charnel-house ready to receive her, and she was afraid to

enter. She was seized with surprise that she had ever come back. Why had she? What was it that had drawn her home even against her will? She had fostered no false hope of finding the child alive on her return.

After a while she rose and went in. The kettle was singing on the hob, and the small table was pushed forward and laid ready for tea, but Luce noticed neither of these things. Her eyes sought the spot where the cradle always stood, dreading, yet longing, to see it; but the deal box set on roughly made rockers stood in its accustomed place no longer. After much search she found the cradle stowed away in the shed behind the house where Mark had hidden it out of sight. She guessed it was he who had done this, to spare her pain; but she resented being spared the pain. Picking up the cradle she returned again to the kitchen and placed it in the same spot by the fire where it had been put by Lupin, on the day it had been made. Then flinging herself down on the floor she cast

her arms round the shabby wooden box and burst into tears.

Night fell and the tide ebbed with it, the moonlight cutting the retreating waters like a blade. The far-off noises of the village were hushed, but to Luce, lying there in the stillness, the house was full of sound. She shivered, for, though she knew that Ben Lupin and her child were with her, there was no companionship in their presence, and she was sore pressed with loneliness.

Many weeks passed and Luce continued living at the White Cottage; people were surprised at this, partly because the Rev. Benjamin Baugh had offered to take her into his service at the rectory, but more perhaps that they held the cottage to be a marking spot, and her remaining there a help to keeping alive the memory of the past in men's minds.

On this matter Mrs. Myrtle found herself in accord with the village. She had never entered the White Cottage since the day Luce

refused to marry Mark Tavy; she had, however, spent many bitter moments waiting for her daughter to visit her; but Luce, numb to all but her own suffering, failed to notice her mother's absence. The old woman could not believe in disapprobation so well merited being held so cheap, and was for ever picturing Luce kept back by the fears that forgiveness would not be forthcoming. Not that Mrs. Myrtle had the least desire to refuse the forgiveness: she merely held her small, wizened head high, as befitted a woman who might at any moment be called upon to dispense it.

Meanwhile, she kept a watchful eye on Mark. It was a matter of no small comfort to her that though Luce had cast him aside he evinced no desire to salve his sores by marriage with another woman. Neither did she fail to note that his material affairs prospered, and that in consequence he had risen in public opinion from a man of small account to one the village could without shame speak well of. All things considered, this was no small stride

for a young man to take in four years—the village being slow to speak well of any one, holding that ill words were easier found and more suiting to most men's behaviour.

Mark did not again visit the White Cottage. His absence surprised Luce; the quality of self-repression struck her as being new to the man and set her wondering. She felt a sudden need of his companionship; after all, they had been great friends as children.

One evening, as she was seated sewing at the window, she saw him far off on the rocks searching for laver. Putting on a shawl she ran out, stopping a moment to wonder at herself before hurrying down the narrow cliff path. It was some years since she had been upon the shore; an unexpected light-heartedness possessed her as she jumped from rock to rock across the amber pools of salt water. Long past scenes of Mark's and her own childhood returned to her mind, and her heart warmed to him more

than it had for many years. He stood looking seawards, so that her approach remained unnoticed; as she drew nearer she half smiled, thinking of his surprise. At the last moment he turned and saw her, the colour reddening his face and then ebbing out.

"Luce!" he exclaimed.

The smile still hovered about her lips. "Well!" she answered; and when he still remained silent, she came a few steps nearer and peered into his basket. "What do 'ee be looking for? Lavers?"

"Ess."

"I've a good mind to give 'ee a hand."

"You'd better take off they boots then."

She sat down obediently.

"Your feet iddn't brown the zame ez they wor," he remarked when the thick woollen stockings had been peeled off and pushed into the boots.

"No, I s'pose they iddn't," she agreed, glancing at her feet.

He swung round on his heel. "The tide's

on the turn. 'Tiddn't no manner o' use looking for laver now."

An expression of disappointment crossed Luce's face. "'Tis lonesome over to the cottage," she said after a pause.

Mark did not answer. A big stickleback glided out from under the stone on which he was standing. Luce watched the fish nose its way round the pool.

"Do 'ee mind how we used to hunt they ez childer?" she asked.

"Ess."

"I shud dearly like to catch this 'un and let 'un go arter," she said, rising.

Mark made no effort to help her.

"I can't catch 'un all by myself," she added.

Then he came to her assistance. The pool was deep, and the stickleback fleet of fin, and Mark soon forgot all but the chase on which he was bent. Luce laughed, counting each laugh and putting it by in her memory. She could not quite escape her

loneliness even then, but she felt as if she were on the point of escaping. The advancing tide drove them from their sport. Luce picked up her boots and walked barefoot. A soft, intermittent breeze blew off shore, and a scent of heather mixed with sea smells. Crossing the rocks they came to a wide stretch of white sand, behind which rose the samphire-striped cliffs, while far above two hawks floated motionless as if asleep.

Luce drew in a deep breath. "I do be plazed to look at it all," she said.

Mark did not answer. The girl's unexpected friendliness troubled him. He did not wish again to raise false hopes, the laying of them cost too much. True, it was as well known to him as to the rest of the village that Luce's love for Lupin had turned to hatred. Deep down in the young fisherman's heart, however, there lurked a suspicion of such a sudden transformation; he felt that the rapidity of the change must entail a

lack of thoroughness in the process, which would leave the whole fabric of the thing open to the rot. In his opinion, Luce, like the rest of her sex, was fickle. Who, he asked himself, could depend on the constancy of either her love or hate?

But even while he pondered the matter his need of her increased, and he was fain to distrust his own judgment. Rough handling had not altered the man's nature much; it had grown a little softer, perhaps, a little stronger, and showed a certain meagre capacity for expansion. The spirit's growth is a subtle thing, not lightly to be measured.

They had reached the narrow cliff path and Luce had begun to ascend. Mark hesitated a moment whether to follow her or not. She glanced down at him. Something in the expression of the thin, eager face raised towards her brought the tears into her eyes.

"You do look divered, lad!" she exclaimed. "What do make 'ee look so divered?"

He fell quickly back into the shadow of the cliff.

"'Tiddn't nought but your fancy," he answered. Then slinging the basket over his shoulder, he turned away. "I be gwaying back along by the beach," he said, and left her.

It was about this time that something happened which once more reinstated Lupin in the good opinion of his fellows. Spong found no small satisfaction in the knowledge that though not the primary cause he himself had not a little to do in the bringing of this change about.

The matter fell in this way. One morning a letter addressed to Lupin, and bearing a foreign postmark, reached the village. Lupin being still in prison, the question arose whether the letter should be delivered at the White Cottage during his absence, or await his return, lying securely meanwhile in a drawer at the post-office. The postmistress was for retaining the letter, wish-

ing, she said, "to keep an eye on it." Spong, stirred by a like desire, was anxious that the letter should be given into his charge. Both parties being persons of determination, it is doubtful how the dispute would have ended had not the village interfered, which it did in the following fashion. A meeting was held at "The Fisherman's Desire," and the envelope containing the letter laid on the table for general inspection. No one present required more than a glance at the envelope to come to the conclusion that the contents were a matter of public interest, but each being a little doubtful of what might be passing in his neighbour's mind, was careful not to formulate his opinion in words. Though, as they all remarked, a letter might as well be never written as never read.

At this stage of the proceedings, beer was handed round, every man paying for his neighbour, a custom much in fashion among the villagers, as it imparted a sense of being

generous and left no one out of pocket by the transaction. Tongues became loosened and Spong rose to address the company.

"He was not," he said, "going to argy, being no believer in arguefication, holding sich as more hindrance than help.

"The letter," he explained, "came from Australia, the same being a colony of the Crown. He hoped that all present would agree that what consarned the Crown consarned them."

The company was not slow in signifying assent, one man volunteering the remark that "He didn't want to set up for being a Radical, but he would say the Crown was terrible having."

Spong took no notice of the interruption. "What consarns the Crown consarns us," he repeated. "Thickey letter came from a colony o' Queen Victoria's and let they that have anything to say, say it." And with this he once more resumed his seat, putting the letter on the table and his hand over it.

A silence ensued, the company crowding closer round the table, trying to peer through Spong's fingers at the letter beneath.

"I've opened 'un unbeknown!" he exclaimed excitedly.

The others craned forward, drawing in their breath, the host alone preserving sufficient presence of mind to remark that Septimus Spong must pay for the beer.

The little postman raised no protest; true, paying for the beer would take a good slice out of a week's wage, but that seemed small compared with the pleasure in store. His red face grew redder as, after searching in his pockets for his spectacles, he found to his dismay that they had been left in his old coat hanging up against the door of his kitchen. The company however graciously consented to wait while a boy was despatched to fetch them, regaling themselves on Spong's beer and some well-merited abuse of Lupin thrown in to pass the time.

Septimus did not join in either amuse-

ment; it was sufficient for him that he had gained his point; the letter was to be read and he to read it.

At last the boy arrived, breathless, with the spectacles tightly clasped in his hand. The sight of him awoke a desire in Spong's heart to prolong the joys of anticipation. Unknown to him the wish stood every chance of being gratified, for as he slowly and deliberately fitted the spectacles on his nose he discovered that both glasses had fallen out. It was with difficulty that he suppressed a cry of dismay. As yet no one else had noticed the absence of the glasses, the eyes of all present being fixed on the unopened letter; but he could not but ask himself how long would the loss remain undiscovered, and what would happen when the moment of discovery came. Well he knew that the patience of the company had been exhausted with the beer and that there was not one of all there present who would be willing to wait till the missing glasses

were found. Shorn of his glasses the little postman had but scant power of seeing; the thought, however, of any other than himself being the first to read the letter was unbearable. He determined to play a bold game. There was metal in the man, and in this moment of emergency his courage belled sound.

"Move, can't 'ee?" he exclaimed. "How do 'ee reckon a man can zee wi' 'ee all fiddling round the light like so many mothses?

"Law jay!" he continued, as the company, thus adjured, fell back a step, "there be a deal more shadder than aught else about the bodies o' 'ee, and by the same token I'll thank 'ee to stand in the shadder."

During the general scuffle of feet that ensued, Spong spread the letter out upon the table. The writing was cramped, unclear, and not one word could the little postman decipher; but his blood was up, and if through the irony of an inconsiderate fate he was deprived of the reading of the letter, he determined to make as good a guess at the

contents as would the wisest under a like circumstance. It did not take him many minutes' rapid thinking to come to the conclusion that the letter contained news of a legacy, but his mind was still wavering as to the exact amount when the host of the inn suggested "an extry drop all round at Mr. Spong's expense."

Delay, it was fast becoming evident, was a too expensive luxury to be indulged in, and the little postman decided to have done with it.

"I must tell 'ee," he began, clearing his throat, and unconsciously making a dive behind him with his hand as if in search of his leather post-bag, "that this do be a death-bed letter."

The spirits of the company rose at the announcement.

"Did he die hard?" they asked.

"He did, poor man, he did," Spong answered, shaking his head.

"What wor it?"

"The zame ez takes most o' 'em. Internals."

"Well, I niver; and over to Australie."

"A terrible spontaneous place for the zame, so thay tells me," the little postman answered, his round, red face shining with excitement.

"And be ut all writ down on thicky bit o' paper?"

"Ess, in black and white, though the man that did the job suffered a dal from the rheumatiz in his fingers."

There was a certain acidity about the tone of the latter half of the remark.

"They has rheumatiz over to there, then?"

"Zims zo."

"Iddn't there no more'n the letter than thick?"

"There's money in it, that's what's in it," Spong answered in a solemn voice.

"Begore!"

"And what may be the sum?" asked the host.

The little postman leant back in his chair,

while his small, deep-set eyes seemed to grope inward. "Aj?" he exclaimed slowly, "Now what do you reckon it be?"

"Fifty pun," said the host in a shaky voice.

Again Spong leant back in his chair, drew in his breath and puffed it slowly out. "More'n that," he answered.

"Begore!" the company exclaimed.

The host's voice became shakier. "A hundred!" he suggested.

Spong leant farther back in his chair and his eyes grovelled deeper in. "More'n that," he repeated.

"Begore!" exclaimed the company.

"'Tis to be hoped that he'll mind that he was born and bred in these parts," put in the man whose son knew about Shropshire.

"Five hundred!" said the host with twitching lips.

Spong sat suddenly upright in his chair. "Double ut," he said, and then fell back once more. The company raised their hands, exclaiming, "Lauwrd ha' mussy on us! The

double o' five hundred bain't a penny less than a thousand pun."

"Not a penny less," Spong admitted.

"Heaven heal us," said the company.

"And may Ben Lupin be ez good to me ez I shall always be to he," devoutedly remarked the man whose son knew about Shropshire.

"Us be all vriends o' he," the company snapped back.

The host, who had been silent some time, now broke in. "Us must give he a public welcome home when his time's up. I reckon to myself that all things considered he should be proud and willun to pay for the beer. A mort o' beer—a man's fill."

The host rose. "But what I'm saying to myzelf all the time," he exclaimed, laying his hand on Spong's shoulders, "'What shud I do,' I ses to myself, 'if beer wor given free *fust* and Ben Lupin cut up green and wudn't pay for ut *arter?*' There be no way back when the ale be wance drunk."

One by one those present began to steal

away—each wishful of being the first to give news of the legacy, till at last Spong and the innkeeper were left alone.

"I shud like to ha' a look at thic letter myzelf if so be I might," said the host.

"No!" Spong replied, putting his hand over it and shutting his teeth with a snap, "the letter is in my keeping and he don't pass out o' ut. Leastways, not willunly."

"Zims that the money worn't long wi' ut."

"The money's to valler."

"'Tis a far vallering from Australie. S'posing it never comed?"

Spong faced round to the inn-keeper. "I niver heard tull that you wor to be the better for ut, anyways," rising and inadvertently leaving the envelope exposed. The next moment the host had picked it up and begun eagerly the contents.

"Why," he exclaimed, falling back against the bar, tiddn't nought but ordinary writers' trash. The iddn't no mention o' any legacy at all."

CHAPTER XIX

TIDINGS of the legacy did not take long to reach the White Cottage, Mrs. Myrtle herself acting as bearer of the news. The old woman felt that the sudden windfall that had been strewn in Lupin's path afforded in some unaccountable way an explanation of her daughter's obstinate refusal to marry Mark. Personally, she, together with the majority of the villagers, had long since come to the conclusion that Hester and the child perished on the bleak December night four years back. Hitherto, however, this belief had had but small influence on her schemes for the future, feeling as she did that a man so out-of-elbows with respectability could do little to rehabilitate her daughter in the eyes of the world. But backed by a thousand pounds Ben became at once a

person of consequence, and Mrs. Myrtle was not slow to acknowledge the fact. Less alert of mind than his wife, John Myrtle failed to look at the matter in the same light. "He could not," he said, "see what the thousand pounds had to do with the matter," and no reason that his wife could adduce served to clear his mental vision. There was little doubt that so long as Hester Lupin's death remained unproved, the law stood behind John Myrtle's side of the argument, yet the old woman surmised that a fallacy lay concealed under the apparent coincidence, and that laws made for the well-to-do would not in the end be found to run contrary to the desires of a man who owned a thousand pounds. Meeting Mark Tavy at this time she was surprised to find that her feelings towards the young fisherman had imperceptibly undergone a change; she no longer held him in the same high esteem; something—she hardly knew what—had lowered him in her estimation. Stop-

ping in front of Mark, she peered up in his face.

"Well!" she exclaimed, "have you heard the news?"

"What news?" he answered vaguely.

"Oh, you're behindhand as usual—why, what news should it be? Ben Lupin has been left a thousand pounds."

"So folks say. I wonder if there be any truth in it."

"'Tis true enough," Mrs. Myrtle answered sharply. "Ben iddn't like some o' us. Luck 'ull run for 'un sooner or later."

The old woman's altered manner made but scant impression on Mark, who had grown strangely indifferent to what the outside world thought of him.

"Well," he answered, "I hope 'tis true, he'll need all the luck he can git."

Mrs. Myrtle drew in her lips—a trick she had when displeased.

"You'll see they'll marry now," she said.

"Who do 'ee mean by they?"

"Her and Ben."

"Luce?"

"Who else should I mean?"

Mark turned away sharply: "Tiddn't possible; Ben's wife may be alive, for aught he knows."

"The law u'll make it easy for 'un."

"'Tiddn't in the power o' the law.

"You'll see 'twill come about as I say."

There was a tone of conviction in the old woman's voice that Mark found hard to listen to with indifference. The memory of Luce's unexpected friendliness towards himself returned to his aid. "Her'll never forgi'e 'un: he wronged her too much for that."

"Her's forgiven 'un already, though maybe her don't know it."

"What makes 'ee say thic?"

"Why did her come back along home if her hadn't? Her knows well enough 'tis here he could find her if he so wished."

Again Mark was silent awhile. A thought had passed through his mind, send-

ing the colour into his face. "Her's been more friendzome to me o' late," he said shyly.

The old woman laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, Mrs. Myrtle's, originating as it did more in contempt than amusement, and Mark winced while the colour in his face deepened. "Maybe her didn't mean nought," he exclaimed.

"Aye, you may rest content wi' that," Mrs. Myrtle answered. "Her 'ull marry Ben Lupin, and though 'twas an ill day for her when first she set eyes on 'un, I shan't raise no word agin the weddin."

Mark turned on his heel and left her. It was waste of time to protest. All that the old woman prophesied might well come to pass; and yet, as he walked away, the hope of one day winning Luce's love, which had been re-awakened in his heart, still smouldered. Hurrying forward he found himself suddenly in front of the White Cottage. He had not noticed the way his steps were leading him. The door stood open,

and he paused irresolute whether to enter or no. Of what good was it for him to come here? What could he tell this woman? What ask her that she would grant? Soft summer scents blew across to him from the garden, and a gillyflower nodded overhead, where it had grown in a crevice of the white-washed wall. Reaching up Mark picked it. The flower's homely smell seemed to entice him to enter, and pushing open the gate he went in. Again he stopped short, surprised at the sound of sobbing. From where he stood the interior of the kitchen was visible, and he could see Luce seated at the table, her head buried in her arms. Beside her was a small bundle of clothes and a basket packed with food. His thoughts returned with a sudden rush to the Sunday morning five years ago, when she had told him of her unfaithfulness. He could almost hear her voice:

"I wanted to be true to 'ee, I tried to be true to 'ee, but lad I just worn't."

It seemed to him standing there that he had never wholly forgiven her until this moment. Raising her head she saw him. Mark, scarce knowing what he did, entered the cottage. For a moment she sat up straight — watching his approach, then her head sank down once more upon her arms, and she burst afresh into tears. Mark stretched out his hand and touched her shyly.

"Luce," he said; "Luce."

She did not answer, and his eyes wandered from her to the bundle and freshly packed basket.

"Be 'ee going away?" he asked.

"'Ess."

"Why don't 'ee bide long wi' us?"

"This iddn't no place for me here."

"What do make 'ee feel so?"

There was no reply, and silence fell between them, broken at last by Mark.

"He'll be home along soon."

She shivered. Watching her a feeling of

envy passed through the young fisherman. "Be 'ee a-feard o' 'un?" he asked.

Luce raised her head with a gesture of fierce pride. "Why shud I be a-feard?"

Again there was silence. Mark walked to the window and stared out across the sea. He had little hope of winning this woman, yet it seemed to him that he should never cease striving to win her. Suddenly Luce turned to him, the whole expression of her face changed.

"Lad," she said, "us wor childer together, and I'll tull 'ee the truth—I be a-feard—I be a-feard o' zeeing 'un vace to vace. All these long years my heart has been hard agin 'un, and I reckoned maybe 'twud be all wan to me whether my eyes looked on 'un or no; but he be coming back, and I kind o' feel 'un near; tiddn't no furren lad zame ez I thought to meet, but jest the old Ben. I've been angered agin him all these long years, and now my anger is gone from me and I be a-feard."

Mark, standing looking at her, struggled with a new bitterness that had arisen in his heart. Her eyes had a piteous frightened expression that he had not seen there since she was a child. Hester Lupin's name rose to his lips, but he was afraid to utter it, dreading lest the mere mention of the name should set in motion some new train of thought, and tend to confirm Luce in the behalf that Lupin was now a free man. Suddenly and against his will the words came: "Folks say that Hester Lupin's dead." Mark held his breath waiting for her answer, and when there was no reply he slipped again into the trap of speech. "Maybe Ben's quit o' her."

The girl's face hardened. "Not a-fore the law."

"No," he asserted eagerly, "the law be all for evidence."

Luce laughed a short, harsh laugh. "The law be right," she said; "who knows but her might rise and come a-tween us agin?"

There was a moment's silence which Mark struggled to prolong, then he said: "S'posing her niver comed back."

"Her wud ha' come a-tween us; maybe that's all her wants."

"You wudn't——" Mark exclaimed, and stopped short.

"I will niver valler 'un to dishonour," she said huskily. "I must be gwaying," she continued in an altered voice. Stooping down she picked up her bundle.

Mark caught her hand. "Luce," he exclaimed, "why must 'ee go? Bide long o' me. I will make 'ee a good husband."

She looked at him as if she only half understood what he said.

"'Twull be less lonezome for 'ee," he pleaded.

"I'm fair used to being lonezome," she answered, with a smile at the dreariness of her own plight.

"But you be but a young slip o' a thing now, what wull it be when you come

to grow old? 'Twull be a deal lonezomer then."

"'Tiddn't o' thic I be a-feard."

"But you be a-feard."

The words seemed to recall the memory of some new peril to her. "I must be gwaying," she exclaimed hurriedly. "This is no place for me."

He caught her arms and forced her back into the chair. "Listen Luce, bide a bit till I sell my boats, then I'll valler 'ee where 'ee wull. I'll be a good husband to 'ee, Luce. I'll niver cross 'ee. You'll veel a deal safer."

She had scarce listened to what he said, but the last words caught and fixed her attention.

"Safer," she repeated musingly.

Mark, inwardly bitter, saw his advantage and pressed it. "There ull be zomewan to stand a-tween 'ee then," he said.

The girl's head sank down once more between her arms. "Go," she said. "I be mortal wearied, and termorrer I wull tell 'ee ess or no."

Then he went out; but he was filled with fear lest when the night came she should steal away under the cover of darkness, so, finding shelter beside a hedge, he lay down and waited. Dusk fell, the moon swung herself up above the hills, and Mark, whose eyes were fixed on the White Cottage, saw the door open slowly. A moment later and Luce, bearing her bundle, passed through the wicket-gate into the road. She was crying, and Mark could hear the low choked-back sobs as rising to his feet he prepared to follow her.

Up the hill she went, her slight figure throwing a long shadow in the moonlight. He had kicked off his boots and was following her barefoot. Once she glanced round, and he pressed close up against the hedge, sheltering behind a great bush of sloes. He allowed the distance between them to increase, losing sight of her in the windings of the road, but the sound of her weeping came to him through the still night. Having

climbed the hill she stopped; she had reached the last point from whence the White Cottage was visible among the trees. It looked small enough, with the moon shining down from a widespread sky above on to a widespread sea beneath, but at the sight of it an overpowering loneliness and fear of what the future might have in store took possession of her. Suddenly—almost without set purpose—she began to retrace her steps; then, as she went on, her purpose formed and her pace became more hurried, till at last she broke into a run. Stretching out her arms she fled forward—it was as if she feared that the little cottage that stood so white and compact before her eyes might have vanished, lost in the tearing asunder of a dream. Mark saw her reach the door, wrench open the lock, and enter.

He broke into an unconscious sigh of relief.

"Maybe her will let me work for her now," he said.

When the morning came he knocked at the cottage, and she came out to him.

"Be it 'ess, Luce?" he asked tremulously.

She looked for a moment in his face, pale and worn as her own.

"'Ess," she answered.

CHAPTER XX

A FEW days later a report spread to Bere-Upton that Lupin had been released. Some three weeks had yet to run before the expiration of the sentence, and the news of his premature discharge threw the village into a ferment. The knowledge that after all the legacy was non-existent gave a sense of personal loss. The indignation aroused at the discovery fell not on Spong, the perpetrator of the fraud, but Lupin, the villagers feeling that free beer and forgiveness once united could not again be cut asunder. So marked was the general displeasure, that some of the younger, more highly strung, and possibly more moral of the Bere-Uptonites, expressed their determination to duck Ben in the horse-pond the moment he was rash enough to set foot inside the village; he was not, to put it

grimly, to be defrauded of his public welcome, merely the nature of the welcome was to be changed. A certain unexpected delicacy of sentiment prevented the villagers from making their intention known to Luce; and when, late one afternoon, Lupin was descried coming over the hill, she was ignorant both of his coming and the reception that awaited him. Her promise to marry Mark remained a secret, and she tried to thrust the memory of it between herself and the thought of Lupin; but it proved a feeble weapon of defence, which she had already come to regret having laid hands on. After all, it would have been better to have fled away alone; she had but added to her burden a double weight of responsibility. Courage to retract her promise failed her. True, it had not been of Mark that she had thought in giving her consent, but none the less she had been startled at the effect her words had on him. He, for his part, had wasted no time in preparations for the wedding, but having sold his

boats to the first bidder, had gone to a town some ten miles further down the coast, where she was to join him later, and from whence they were to be privately married. The interval of waiting seemed interminable to Luce, each day bringing the coming of Lupin nearer. There were moments in the long watches of the night when it was as if he had already come, recalling her imperiously to the duties of wifehood. Putting out her hands, she would try and thrust him from her, only to grasp the thin, intangible air; and yet she felt that he had conquered, and remembering her wounded honour, shrank back appalled from those nuptial embraces in which her spirit succumbed to his. It seemed to her strange and terrifying that her wrongs no longer served as a barrier between her and the man who had injured her; for close on five years she had leaned on it in fancied security, now it had fallen, and she knew not where to lay hands upon another.

The afternoon was fast drawing to a close,

the sky, heavy with clouds, sagged earthwards in soft grey mists. Looking west a darker line showed where sea and horizon met. Sound travelled dully, but Luce, as she sat by the open window, ceased working from time to time, and listened to a hoarse, confused noise that broke in upon her. It was like a cry of anger torn from men's mouths in the uttering, and changed to a laugh, at once crueller and fiercer than the passion that preceded it. Luce shuddered unconsciously, though she gave little thought to the reason of the tumult. On the table lay a suit of Ben's old clothes; she was putting a patch in the sleeve. Tears trickled slowly down her face as she worked, but the stitches were close and fine; it was a small thing that she could do for him, and she took heed that she did it well. Patched and stained, they smelt of the sea, these old blue serge clothes. She fingered the cloth tenderly, in some subtle way it reminded her of the character of its owner.

"There be wear in 'ee yit," she exclaimed. "Rare good stuff but hard used. Ben and 'ee be much o' a muchness."

The sound of the tumult grew louder, the shrill shriek of a boy making itself heard above the duller roar from men's throats. Putting down her work Luce rose and went to the door. Far up near the head of the lane a crowd heaved, kicked, screamed, now lurching lop-sidedly forward a few steps and then again falling back as if it were pushed, pulled, and made a fool of by some invisible power. Frightened and yet curious, Luce approached nearer, and saw the gigantic figure of Thomas Ticknor emerge for a brief space from, and then lost again in, the struggling mass. A moment later she caught sight of her father laying about him right vigorously with his fists. Then the crowd parted, and a half-naked man rolled out from among it and lay, a bloody limp heap, in the middle of the road. With a shriek of delight the crowd pounced and all but

reached him, when rising he scuttled forward straight for the White Cottage. Slacking pace a moment to shake a fist at the mob he came more slowly past Luce, and she recognized, in the bleeding, mud-bedraggled figure, Ben Lupin. She watched him enter the cottage, and when the door closed behind him she turned on the crowd with a fury exceeding its own. Half satiated, but loth to let go of its prey, the mob faced her motionless, stubborn, ill at ease. Intent on protecting the man she loved, Luce had no words to throw at the hungry crowd, yet she held it at bay by sheer force of will. Driven to reflect the mob at once became ashamed, edging back from the woman, and she, with a quick glance of scorn, turned and entered the cottage.

In the few moments' respite Ben had flung off his torn, muddy rags, and dressed himself in the old blue serge suit that lay on the table. His face was cut and bruised, mud caked in his hair and eyes, but he had lost

his hunted look, and had once more become master of himself. Taking a thick stick from the corner of the kitchen, he turned to Luce.

"I be gwaying out to 'em," he said.

"No, no," she exclaimed, putting out her hands.

"But I be," he answered, stubborn and unabashed by the thought of the sorry figure he had cut but a moment back.

She flung herself upon her knees. "They'll kill 'ee!"

"I'll be quits wi' the cowards fust," he answered.

She rose to her feet, a new wave of emotion sweeping over her as she remembered again all that she had to fear from this man. "Go if you will," she said bitterly, "life iddn't everything arter all."

Ben halted, struck by her apparent indifference. "'Tis all the zame to 'ee, I s'pose, whether I be killed or no."

"You be nought to me now," she answered, turning away her head.

"'Ee say thic, Luce?"

"'Ess—arter what you've done."

"You'll no live wi' me again?"

"Do 'ee reckon I be so mortal fond o' dishonour?"

"You'll no live wi' me again?" he repeated, raising his voice.

"Haven't I told 'ee?"

"Luce," he exclaimed, drawing close and putting his arm round her, "'tiddn't nought but talk, thic?"

She pushed him from her. "I do mean what I say," she exclaimed feebly. "Me and Mark——" then she stopped short.

But Lupin paid no heed. "Where's the chile?" he exclaimed, looking round with a start. "Be 'un a-zlape in t'other room?"

She did not answer, and he rose and went to the bedroom in search of it.

Meanwhile, Mark, hearing from a chance stranger of Lupin's return, was hurrying back to Bere-Upton. He had no fear that Luce would again play him false, but he cursed

himself for making her trials harder. Remembering the many days that had elapsed since he had obtained her consent, he was filled with self-torment at his own folly. He had foreseen no need of hurry, that was his excuse. But he should have remembered that Lupin had always forestalled him. The grey mists lay low upon the hills, now rising a moment to show a strip of short green turf, then enshrouding the young fisherman till his clothes dripped wet on his cold body. Following the line of the cliffs he suddenly drew up short. Beneath him grew a mass of thrift, and he remembered, with a start of pain, that it was a flower Luce loved. With a smile, half of contempt, at himself for wasting time at such a moment on such an errand, he rapidly descended the cliff and gathered a bunch of the tiny pink-faced flower. Turning to go he cast a hasty glance round, and saw further below, and stretching out from beneath a big rock, what in the grey misty light resembled the skeleton of a hand and arm.

Startled, he went a step nearer, and the thing changed in appearance, growing to look like a dead tree branch. Wasting no further time, Mark began to reascend the cliff, and had all but reached the top when some power stronger than his will drove him back once more. Vexed at the delay he sprang down the cliff side, slipping and jumping till he planted his feet on the rock, and as he did so he felt the big stone slowly lurch forward. Gripping a thorn tree that grew near with one hand, and digging the other deep into the turf, he held his breath while the rock rolled down the cliff and fell with a dull thud into the sea below. A moment passed and Mark's eyes, following the track of the stone, fell upon a skeleton which, shaken out of its concealment, lay stretched upon the grass. The grey hair attached to the skull showed by its great length that the skeleton was a woman's, and Mark, staring down, knew instinctively that he was looking on all that remained of the ill-fated Hester Lupin. Near her was another and

smaller heap of bones. A wind rose and swept away the mists so that the sea looked bluer, the grass greener, and the bones whiter, and Mark stared down at them till he lost the power of seeing. One question circled continually in his brain. "Why had he been called upon to find the bones now? Why not five years ago? Why now?"

Night fell, and when darkness had hidden the skeletons he threaded his way up the cliff's face, turned once more in the direction of the village, and as he walked he muttered, "'Tiddn't to be expected that I shud tull."

The door of the White Cottage was open; the moon, rising, shone in on Mark and on a a small piece of pink thrift that he still held in his hand. When he saw the flower he suddenly cried out as one possessed: "Luce, Luce! You be free to marry who you wull."

But she had not waited to be released; the cottage was empty, she had left it to follow Lupin.

* * * * * * *

Years passed; the White Cottage fell into disrepair, for the villagers held the house to be unlucky, and no one ventured to live there; but each year, with the coming round of summer, Mark would steal into the little garden, sit beneath the apple tree, and, closing his eyes, dream that the cottage was his home, Luce his wife, and the voices on the breeze those of his children.

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